JOURNEYS

POEMS BY

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Lesley Burt
Bob Cooper
Annest Gwilym
Jan Harris
Martha Landman
Daphne Milne
Grant van Wingerden

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# CONTENTS

**James Bell**  
increasingly on pilgrimage  
strange meetings  
places I've never been  
how the good news was brought from Porlock to Nether Stowey  
Hodogaya - 5th Station of the Tokaido  
on leaving  
on the flight to Nairobi  
the great journey  
Paris Metro - December 2017  

**Lesley Burt**  
The Paris coach party  

**Bob Cooper**  
On Finding A Train-Ticket Bookmark Near The End Of Your Copy Of Middlemarch  
Abdulatif, Now The Family Head, Says What Matters  

**Annest Gwilym**  
At night her bed became a pea-green boat . . .  

**Jan Harris**  
While still, we journey far  
If we travel towards each other,  
you and I,  

**Martha Landman**  
Stopping at Mars on The Way to Venus  
the road will take its toll  
east of Africa  
All Along the Mekong
Daphne Milne

We could Pedalo all the way
to San Francisco
CEDRIC TRAVELS BY TRAIN
Here be Dragons

Grant van Wingerden

Stopped
increasingly on pilgrimage

you walk into a landscape
that is always full
where quartz in stone shines
mica in granite flashes

every foot forward
with its small offerings
along your way as milestones

a woven circle of wheat
a posy of purple heather
a bracelet of snail shells

waymarks to the presence of those
who have gone ahead
to seek the possibilities of the path

for the way is narrow
even if it exists
remade by your own feet

night calls for a shieling
where outside dark glows
then morning water from a clear pool –
the well at the world’s end
strange meetings

as I journey and dawn rises
bleak for what becomes a dull day
there is no sign of animals or birds
the coach travels too fast along
deep routes man has etched
carved and sectioned - land shared
with other creatures who have names
given by man - they do not acknowledge
the gift and do not buy or sell land - live
where temperature and food are congenial
no wildlife or domestic life - then suddenly
lapwings in one large field and nothing else
their hooked plumes rise out of mist -
the land soon gone by - traverse concrete
bridges and ramps then flat land with
straight roads - through towns never heard of
and forget as I travel into the afternoon
see only an unearthly geometry - squares
and oblongs with occasional smaller ones
walled with a gate and white crosses inside -
'where they fell' it is said - symbols a century
old and counting - I cannot say if these
are sites of advances or retreats with intervals
of rest and sleep in a pitted land
now disappeared not to be met again -
soon I will reach Arras - see the signs
begin to appear with kilometres to go -
I know that name - once reached after
weeks or months - now in a couple of hours -
still time to see before it gets dark
I've never been to Manhattan - never will -
except with songs and poems
have seen the photographs and movies so I could go back
then travel to the Arctic again to see
its frozen wastes before
a complete ice melt as it wouldn't be the same
toss a coin to decide what small town in the Mid-West
I could go back to again -
No Hope, Virginia - and arrive into the next Lee Child novel
will return to the furthest point of each continent
where I have never been
to contemplate each unchanged view of an ocean
it's so good to go back to places never visited before
such activities are inexpensive -
will travel back out to St Kilda again early next week
how the good news was brought from Porlock to Nether Stowey

laden with mud on shoes
cape and hat
a wish not to forget
the news on a
not so good day
while
I wear unsuitable town
shoes just clean forgot
a need for country boots
on foot
the horse fit only
for the knackers now
barely greet others
en route to Stowey
a comet
or shooting star
in the sky easily
ignored on the visit to
dear Sam
this most lovely
and most difficult of men
especially when at work
on a poem or somesuch –

well the servant girl let’s me into
the cottage and disappears into the
kitchen I go to the study
and enter to hear
(cont)

For he on honey-dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise

he sigh’s then pauses
does not continue I swear

and now anonymously content
I remain the person from Porlock
who never drunk of the milk of Paradise
or anything like that though poets
poor souls forever speak about it
three trees dominate the scene where
   people appear like insects
      at this stop among the hills

the slow gestures of trees can easily
   be ignored in a busy world concerned
      with faster movement and not noticed at all

as part of this movement - partly to a stasis
   caused by the lives inside - the nutrition gained
      beside the stall that serves food it has

a philosophy that hurry is unproductive
   just uses up more energy and to say
      hills roll is pure nonsense

a point of view for they stay exactly where
   they are like the trees - like the tableau
      the picture makes only its stillness

yet nobody here will hurry - pilgrims
   like trees have the same attitude inside
      their mix of concerns

both contemplate what passes
   as they stay or depart this station -
      all will go in the end
on leaving

a different kind of dangerous
where all is fire under the blossom
on the apple tree
look out to sea where sky meets water
seamlessly
nature pushes from underground
the timing unlike that of a clock
responds to water and season
an incidence of light
all external yet part of you
whose thoughts have no beginning
yet will come to an end
in the usual way
 sometime in the future
the land disappears like a pianola roll
under the white wing of the plane
to an engine thrum and familiar lines
from Casablanca in my earphones
while the large cabin screen charts
a crude flight path down the coast
of Italy over the Mediterranean –
a fictional Morocco in black and white
and Charles de Gaulle airport are
equally distant here while a taste
of Africa is offered in Tusker beer –
Italy drifts by in strong sunlight
where mountain ranges pass like
a cardiograph measuring heartbeat –
strain to see maybe Naples
Vesuvius or Pompeii and Herculaneum
quickly gone and now only sea below
as we stay in the air for there is no wax
or feather in our defiance of gravity –
next there will be more sea then sand
as a first sight of another continent
before that last goodbye in fog
before that other flight takes off
amidst the sound of propellers
fades into another night while ours
has that certainty of daily colour
although we will arrive in darkness
James Bell

the great journey

today the bramblings arrived again
after most of the rain had stopped
and high winds off the Atlantic gone

only a him and her this time
his plumage brighter while she is cloaked
from view against granite

paler in all shades though still distinct
amongst a flock of green finches - tomorrow
they may be gone like other visitors come and go

though these have not been here
for three years now - then in snow -
and who can say if him and her were among them

in the trip from Scandinavia -
would there be any point in them returning right now
I give change to musicians
who perform in moving trains - it's difficult
to stand and play and sing
with a guitar or an accordion
while moving at speed amongst po faces
who might or might not have internalised
their pure enjoyment
of a repertoire designed to be played
between stops -
appear to and from Montparnasse
on the different journeys we make

change is rarely given to those with testaments -
it’s difficult to follow the general assessment -
recited as they stand alone at one end of a carriage
head tilted slightly forward
hands held loosely before them -
hard luck has a certain dramatic tone
the content too is formulaic
spoken clearly above train noise
hard luck can only be desperate
has to convince between stops
Scene I: Southampton

Betty: Looks like he’s had a good night out.

Laughter from people in nearby seats. Betty pinches the crisp crease in her lemon trousers while the man shambles across the park.

Ted: You said we drive through Normandy?
Leans over the driver’s shoulder: Been there, done that, got the T-shirt.

Driver (using microphone):
One day I’m keeping an eye on my coach while they all go in the Services, see a woman wandering around, looks a bit strange, disappears …

Janice: We saw one just now by the bus shelter. Only had one sock and one shoe on. Amazin’ aren’t they. Adjusts her hairband.

Driver (using microphone):
Well I know she must be in the coach. I get in. No sign. I walk through, look under seats, open the toilet door.

Ted: Settles back, addresses nearby seats. You want to know anything about the Western Front: ask me.

Driver (using microphone):
There she sits, knickers round ankles talking to herself. I tell her to bugger off my coach. Laughter around the coach.
Scene 2: Calais

_Pete:_ Look, look. See ’em? Illegals behind the bushes?

_Chunters along with the radio._

Chantilly lace, doo doo doo.

_Ted:_ A bloke hung onto the petrol tank under our truck with one arm for two hours. Didn’t realise we were actually going back to Belgium.

_Pete:_ Hilarious. Over there, look, More of ’em. washing their smalls in the river. _Laughter._

Perdy face, doo-doo-doo. Anyway, who was Big Bopper? Little Richard?
I’ve no need to stand on the platform again, looking at the dull digital display as it changes, stare along the track, see the train’s distant light, but I remember it now. How the train rumbled, lit carriages slowing as the brakes screeched, overcoats darkening many door’s window-glass.

A pause. Bodies on the platform. Me looking, knowing you were looking, too, my cold hand waiting for warmth.
These are the last minutes of our journey, two years from Syria, so much money, and now driven in a mini-bus to a flat in Wallasey, The Wirral, England.

We’ve been promised windows with curtains, beds, cupboards, a tv and fridge. I have explained to my mother English seems not always to say what it means, so saucepans are for vegetables not just sauces, and tea-bags don’t mean a bag of tea. In a while we’ll get used to British bread.

May my father – who became part of the sea when we all saw Europe as lights beyond the high waves as the boat sank - bless us now and help me. My young brother is now 8, is still quiet yet patient and clever with his hands. He will be an engineer to honour our father. I will learn good English and Latin, be a doctor like my dead uncle. My sister, a year older than me, must now wear a dress, a burka, I don’t like how men look at her. Soon we will have more documents. I will find schools.

Now we stop. I wake us all. We see light beyond an opened door as three women step forward to greet us. We look beyond them, walk slowly what we hope are our final steps.
Annest Gwilym

At night her bed became a pea-green boat . . .

that sailed to the dazzle of distant lands:

over many miles to Babylon, nimble and light, by candlelight;

on magic carpets, soft and silky as the warm Oud-perfumed air, where a muezzin in a minaret called to prayer;

through magic doors in fairy mounds where fair folk danced on mother-of-pearl, gossamer gowns shushing silver flutes;

to a girl made of flowers that became an owl, that flew deep into pine-scented forests on liquid currents. White butterflies hung in honeyed light that rose to a violet sky where larks tunnelled upwards towards the sun.

Dreams burnished by words from the book beside her, where Sheherazade still whispered her silver.
Our plans deflated by a nail in a tyre,
we must wait by the big cream phone
in our holiday lodge, while Cranecleugh Burn
rushes past the veranda on its journey
from moor to Kielder Water.

Our mobiles silently reproach this remoteness,
but the grey heron wings low along the river
with news of fish, and a robin
romances the rowan with song.
We pace, sit, sigh, while morning slides

into afternoon. The landline brings news
of delays, our rescuers diverted to emergencies.
Here, the only urgency is the swallows’
insect-hunt, their mechanical whirr.
With each new call we fall down the list

into tomorrow, patience ebbing
with the late-summer light, until we dine
al fresco, pass bowls of broth from hand to hand,
dip warm bread, sticky with butter
that pools on the soup’s surface, like words

that linger on our lips, before we speak them
into the cool evening air where buzzards circle
higher and higher – do you remember...
with an inflection that lifts like wings,
of course, and did I ever tell you...

and while the dark sky darkens
and is pricked by stars, we wonder
which ones are now just memories, light
carried through time and offered to us now,
like an unexpected gift.
If we travel towards each other, you and I,

we will meet at a point neither of us has reached before, where a welcome bench is neither rickety nor new and the view is not of silent, scented pinewoods rolling down to sea, or city skylines drawn with steel and glass, where traffic travels endlessly to somewhere else, but something in between, and there may be a small café with food that doesn’t zing with chilli on our lips and isn’t bland as rice without a hint of spice or seasoning, and we will sit awhile, careful not to close the gap too soon for fear of something strangely undefined but real, until you say a quiet namaste, shalom, or maybe the salaam, and I will offer you my hand, and you will hold it, warm in yours, with your hand warm in mine.
And then we see it all —
NASA’s space station, Russian
camps, other countries’ claims
the sudden change in skyscape vistas
sharp drop in the UV index
as we move closer to the dim light.

We marvel when we step out
toward the Gothic houses
of the Martians, four feet tall
click-consonants
of Khoisan in their speech.

There are Karoo shrubs, palm trees
tall grass like sugar cane
but not a single gumtree, not a bank
no gas stations, no bottle shops.

In broad brimmed hats
Fellahin locals carry on their business:
slip, slop, slap as if we aren’t here.

Their women’s eyes are emerald green,
they sip indigo-coloured cocktails,
read in the scant shade of paw-paw trees.
I check their titles —
A Beautiful Anarchy,
Slow Pilgrim,
The Second Coming,
Endless Life.
the road will take its toll

there’s a certain intimacy
in us being
on this road —
the miscues, detours
thoroughfares
cul-de-sacs
dedicated cycle lanes run
along bridges and tunnels
but our toes in the gravel
at crossings and junctions
defy intimacy    as does
reading a map
dew on your tattered shoes
you walk far into the early morning
along dusty boulders
the sun nuzzles the earth

from the lookout a breeze
ripples through cane fields
the horizon holds you eternally
in an illusion of stillness

a wedge-tailed eagle soaring on the wind
swoops down
feasts on last night’s roadkill —
a western brown snake
a kangaroo, joey in her pouch

harvesting machines’ distant rumble
makes you yearn for the Indian ocean’s roar
for African savannahs
for mopane trees
for the smell of elephant dung

you disappear with that silver 787
on its westward trek through the clouds

the sun is warmer on the long walk home
memories meander on the river path
between gumtrees and paperbarks
your thoughts are roots and soil
Saffron-robed monks and rice paper makers
   trade goods between boats,  
   they laugh and chat in the floating markets.

Beyond the riverbanks are rice paddies,  
   women in colourful garb and conical hats  
   up to their knees in water.

On their stroll to the candy workshop  
   in the temple village, an elderly couple smile.  
   Sellers charm the crowd.

From our floating airconditioned bar  
   we watch and sip snake wine,  
   they say it makes men strong in bed.

The Royal Palace quietly slips by.  
   There’s hushed talk of Cambodians murdered  
   by the Khmer Rouge in the twilight hour.

Now a display of traditional dances,  
   antiques scattered through silk weaving villages,  
   silkworms chomping away at mulberries.

At Ouknhatey Village, pass stilt shack homes  
   we take refuge from the heat. White Brahman cattle  
   pull painted wooden carts on dusty roads.

We wave at the kids who run and laugh in humidity,  
   play hide-and seek among palm trees,  
   their dark eyes intense with mischief.

We yell “xin chao” to a napkin folding lady  
   before she too passes out of sight —  
   no one wishes to remember what once were killing fields.
Daphne Milne

We could Pedalo all the way to San Francisco

and I would still love you even when the Atlantic swooshes up through the floorboards and we have to keep on paddling feet going faster and faster to escape the rising waves

and I would still love you if we drove from London across the channel on a sea-sick making ferry boat full of English football fans drunk on loss or victory

and I will still love you even though it is raining when we reach Paris too late for a meal at La Cotriade because Paris is Paris and a city for lovers of any age.
Cedric says there is a grand piano in a field just outside St. Erth. You have to be quick to catch it for it has no innards and is only good for chopsticks. Cedric says he saw a covey of nuns on the jetty outside Dawlish. They stood in a row, like starlings on a telegraph wire, and passed a bottle from hand to hand, up and down the line, glugging. Cedric says he doesn’t know how they got there as the jetty is only accessible by sea or by climbing over the fences and the railway line. This was in the sixties and he has no idea of what was in the bottle, but he remembers it well. Cedric says there is a two foot high penguin all alone in the middle of a field between Reading and Exeter St. Davids. Cedric says the white horses of Wiltshire fluff out their manes and gallop away with the chalkdown maidens, but only after dark while the chalkdown men stay silent and grumpy to guard the chalk downs from travellers and unicorns. Cedric says he sat in a train just outside Stockport and waved to a young lady sitting in a train going in the opposite direction whom he had met at a party the previous night and never expected to see again. Cedric says.
It is cold when memory begins.
All the pretty colours of the past
faded like the photographs
like the clothes we wore.

He’s barely there.
The invisible presence
that held the camera
unblinking eye of the recording angel
capturing our dreams or fears.

All the places we went to and some we never did
Switzerland and Barcelona
Italy and France but never Wales.
Great Grandmother came from Wales.

A gaunt, thrawn woman dressed in black
a wielder of lashes
with a bitter tongue and haunted lips.
She owned
the hardest hands in Christendom.

No. We never went to Wales.
I refrain from a strain to explain
why I have no motive to shun in train
no trip in ship or like to hike
buck on the back of the bike
My ventures don't involve
the rest of my resolve
The steps I take
are mine to make

Shrinking circles
distant squares
wit will wilt
where no one cares
Try angles that dangle
on the end
of a long line

Descending driveway
the only way I'm inclined