

Tochni, South Cyprus, 9th April 2004

It has cooled down now and a gentle breeze is stirring the dense foliage that covers the hillside. All day a pair of swallows has been flying back and forth, bringing insects to their chirruping young in the nest that is tucked in the rafters just above where I write. They seem unconcerned by my presence. In the fading light, the nightly calls of frogs that inhabit the small dry riverbed below have begun. Their chorus mingles rhythmically, if not melodically, with the Easter liturgy drifting up from the village basilica. Since I've been staying here the incantations of two priests have punctuated the days and nights. The laboured revving of a beat-up car announces their arrival each morning and evening. The sound of the unlocking of the church is followed by a momentary silence before the loudspeaker clicks on and their recitations begin. The air becomes heady as their voices create complex inter-plays of language and sound. They, and I, become more and more intoxicated by their chants. So, too, do the local boys who respond excitedly in the darkness by ringing the church bell frenetically and setting off loud detonators whose explosions reverberate around the whole valley. Now, in the moonlight, I find myself overwhelmed – by the beauty and aliveness of this place, and the memory of the troubled history that you once told me lies here.

Lefkoça, North Cyprus, 26th July 2005

It has proved to be the hottest day to date - in the high 40's Celsius. As always my wanderings brought me back to the café outside the Saray Hotel, at the heart of the Old City. Deep under a canopy of trees the temperature dipped slightly, helped by a faint breeze that seemed to come down one of the roads leading into the square. I'd ordered my usual coffee and sat watching the street. My thoughts, however, drifted towards you and that time we'd gone up onto the hotel's roof to look across the dereliction of the 'Green Line' into Southern Nicosia. How long this half-reverie lasted I wasn't sure, but slowly I became aware of the events happening around me. A young Anatolian boy - about nine years old - with a scabby nose and tattered dusty clothes had appeared from nowhere. He was standing stock-still and utterly silent, almost shoulder-to-shoulder, with one of the café's other lunchtime customers. There was no verbal communication between them and yet a silent exchange was underway. Without lifting his eyes from his food the man, as if performing a ritual, pushed a small part of his meal to the side of his plate. In response the boy deftly popped the offering into his mouth and slipped away.

Istanbul, 16th July 2010

Retreating from the frenetic activity of the city, I have found refuge in the rose garden that surrounds the Galata Mevlevihane on the European side of the Bosphorus. Do you recall, we came to watch a *samâ* when we were last here together? The garden is full of the most perfect white roses now and, as I sit in the sunshine, the sound of the lunchtime *azans* are mingling and drifting across Istanbul. The feral kittens playing amongst the tombs are oblivious of the brief moment of stillness that is about to fall over the place. Sitting here I am reminded of a similar moment of reverie that we shared in another rose garden; that beautiful one in Aberdeenshire with the planting based on the design of a Paradise garden. It was full of the most delicate Damask roses in that summer of 2004. The blooms had such vibrant colours and sweet perfumes that, as we lingered in the sanctuary of the garden in the late afternoon, we breathed their scents as deeply as we could – as I am doing now – and mused upon the age of the rose. Its eternal qualities and temporal beauty became infused into our long, slow inhalations. The peace and tranquillity induced by that simple act of sensual pleasure, however, was ruptured as two Tornado jets roared overhead. Their flight path from Lossiemouth to Iraq, on a bombing mission, had drawn them directly over our 'Eden'. It seems, as I sit here even now, that stillness can only ever be fleeting.

Ardmore Point, Isle of Mull, 4th April 2013

I wish you were here to see this view. I'm sitting on a rock at the northern-most end of the island, and the sunlight is refracting across the still surface of the sea. An eternal silence seems to hold sway here – counter-pointed only by the transitory calls of passing seabirds. My walk here began along a lane between fields occupied by flocks of grazing greylag geese, then downwards into woodland that thinned to become a large open space, reduced by logging into a brash-tangled desert: the sea visible just beyond. During the whole walk I was accompanied by the musical calls of songbirds. Idyll was a landscape held between the brutality of commercial tree harvesting, and the sweet, unconcerned, voices of these birds flitting between the remnants of trees. The ruined buildings, previously concealed and overtaken by the Sitka Spruce forest that had been planted around them, punctuated the terrain and now provided leafy refuges for the birds. This, I realised, was the village that gave or took its name from the high point where I am sitting now. It seems strange, given the clear sky and view of the distant horizon, to dwell upon those ruins but their presence troubles the landscape, for a painful history of abandonment and human clearance resides here. Expelled from home, church, school and land, the villagers journeyed into exile with few belongings, sailing across the stretch of sea I am looking at now. Though filled with that sadness, this is a beautiful spot. No wonder people chose to settle here. Everything a community needed to survive would have been on hand. It must have been heartbreaking to leave.

Houbansetter, Shetland, 11th August 2016

We drove here today, via Grobsness, to view the site of another family member's croft. We parked at South Voxter and our walk here was up and over a rise of some 100 or so metres of moorland pasture and then down the opposing slope towards the Sound of Houbansetter. The tiny island of Papa Little lay just a short distance across the voe with the setting sun behind it. So the story goes, Babbie, the last female relative to live in the croft, was so strong she could row a boat built for six oarsmen single-handedly across the voe, even in bad weather. Can you imagine how strong she must have been! Tonight, though, the waters were still and the sky clear of all but the most distant clouds. From the brow of the hill, four ruined crofts could be seen just inland from the line of the water, all within sight of one another, and all set 50 metres or so back from the water's edge. While not a village, these crofts must once have acted – along with another set across the Sound but still within view – as a community connected by shared struggles and, in some cases, family ties. Finally abandoned in the late 1960s, the gable ends of the homestead had blown down and much of the stone had fallen inside the croft itself: a slow decaying of the building back into the geology of the landscape from which it had been built. I've collected a stone from the threshold of the croft to bring back for you: a small fragment of the land and of what was once a home.

Glasgow, 30th October 2016

This morning I found myself idly handling that small table bowl for olives that we were given on our visit to Kofinou in 2005. The dish fits comfortably into my hands yet, as I turned it, its rough, heavily grogged and unglazed earthenware surface gently abraded my palm. I thought of its maker: the potter who gifted it to us, of his openness, easy manner and directness. He and his wife were both in their late middle age and, in the wake of the Turkish invasion, had been displaced from the Famagusta area and relocated to Kofinou on the grounds that it was, apparently, a good area for potting clays. The village had once been home to people from both the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. If you recall, we walked around the now abandoned mosque and saw the carved traces of *Qur'anic* texts over the doors to many of the houses. He told us that they had lived in the village for over thirty years but due to ill health he was unable to work at his potter's wheel anymore. By the time we met him, he was managing to make a small living as the caretaker for two local historic basilicas. He and his wife lived in what had once been the *halal* butcher's house. Why this detail comes to mind now I'm not sure but do you remember how, as we talked and drank coffee with the couple, we both became aware of the line of meat hooks set into the ceiling above our heads? For some reason they had never been removed. The strange thing is that I don't recall anything hanging from them.

Lefkosia, South Cyprus, 12th November 2016

People say it's warm here for the time of year, and it's easy to relax; to breath in, deep and long, the night-time aromas of the red blossomed Oleanders that are still in bloom in the City. As I look down into the surface of the fresh cup of coffee before me on the table, and gaze through the café door into the street and the darkness, lines from various Leonard Cohen songs drift through my mind. I heard the news of his death this evening, although actually he died 5 days ago – the day after I arrived here. I imagine I can hear him singing the lyric "you want it darker", intoned in his half-song half-speaking style on his last record. Staring into my cup has reminded me of that photograph, the one you took of the dark surface of the coffee we drank at the café on the beach near the derelict holiday hotels at Varosha. That one where we all sat and laughed as Y read our fortunes in the coffee grains. I remembered, too, the small, black bird we watched – literally "a bird on a wire" – as it perched on the rusting metal tangles, oblivious that they marked the limit between holiday beach and military no-go area; and the dark window slots of the abandoned and crumbling hotels that acted as the unwitting backdrop to the antics of holidaymakers on the beach. That beach is a place full of contradictions. I was there again today and even though it is November, with the heat, there were still people bathing or resting on towels, and enjoying the warmth of the sun whilst being overlooked by secret police. But then, as Cohen sang, "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

Glasgow, 14th December 2016

I'm looking at a photograph of friends – artists standing in a wasteland space. The photo was taken in the demilitarized zone. It is cold and raining here yet it was warm and dry when we were there only a month ago. In the centre of the frame, four individuals and a dog stand facing the camera, barely lit by a solitary light within the no man's land. We were in Nicosia's eastern suburb of Kaïmakli. I am invisible but I was there too, behind the lens. You are in the picture but not here now. Looking at this image, I recall hearing the sound of the *Isha azan* drifting across the short distance that separated us from the North. In that moment, I realized that the mosque the sound was coming from was that same one we'd visited a few years ago: where the keeper had picked a rose for you – long since faded now – and where we shared tea with a man who spoke fluent German. Do you remember? He was the Turkish Director of an organization working to settle immigrants and refugees. Then we were in Kaïmakli too; we just didn't know it. The instant after taking this photo, a Cypriot-Greek soldier approached us out of the darkness. He walked directly towards us, not in a threatening fashion, more in the spirit of an informal warning: "Don't go further into the Dead Zone", he said, "because it is the Dead Zone." In that brief moment and in that small pool of light, we had witnessed a fragment of a parallel world. Just for an instant, our presence and the sound had brought the place alive.

Agios Sozomenos, South Cyprus, 5th August 2017

I still wanted it to be a small, picturesque, ruined, Greek temple, positioned with an artist's eye – in the spirit of Lorain or Poussin – on top of a small hillock surrounded by a rugged, sun-soaked and deserted landscape. From a distance, the area is just as you described it: a landscape formed, in one direction, of limestone cliffs, hardy bush-scrub, occasional palms, eucalyptus trees and, in the other, a flat tabletop vastness of arable land, intersected by the Buffer Zone. Standing beside the building today, the reality was both more prosaic, and more tragic. Up close, the structure, far from being well preserved, is the brutally damaged and abandoned remains of what I've discovered was once the small, inter-communal, village school. Its roof and windows are gone, the ground around it is littered with fragments of masonry, and the stucco walls pock marked with countless bullet holes. One sign of more recent activity in the abandoned village is visible, though. On the building's west wall a line of graffiti has been inscribed, but whatever it had once said has since been obliterated by a subsequent action. Each character has been blocked out with brown or green paint: purposefully if crudely erased. It is as if what once was proclaimed, needed to be forcibly forgotten: so that the building and the surrounding landscape could settle into a deep silence – except for the rhythmic sound of cicadas, and the exhalation of my own breath.

West of Lidras Street, Lefkosia, South Cyprus, 31st March 2018

I was in the south of the Old City walking the line of the Dead Zone from west to east. I've taken this route so many times, both on my own and with you for company, but yesterday there was a chink (so to speak) in the impenetrable wall. A short 8'x4' section of boarding had come away to reveal the interior of one of the old houses that face towards the south but whose living rooms have lain for so many years in no man's land. The roof had given way but under the mess of fallen beams, ceiling matting and plaster debris, domestic appliances, cupboards, a table and three chairs were still in place. During the fighting of 1974, perhaps, a dividing wall had been hacked through and, in this moment, revealed to passers-by an inner room. In reality it was a glimpse, not so much into a home but into the Buffer Zone as a series of previously domestic worlds – neither simply a land- nor an urban-scape but a series of human tragedies that lay just a few feet away from the daily life of the rest of the City. Today I returned there to photograph these inner spaces, but in less than 12 hours the boarding had been replaced and a new mute cladding separated me from the visible evidence of 40 years of history and neglect.

Yediler Turbesi, Lefkoça, North Cyprus, 31st March 2018

A very old woman brought the keys for me, walking from her house with the aid of a walking frame, her feet shuffling and scuffing over the ground. Her progress down the sloping street was painfully slow, and many minutes passed before she reached the tomb's green door, during which time I regretted having taken her from her rest. Seven tombs, each containing the remains of a martyr who had died during the siege and capture of the City by the Ottoman army some four hundred years ago, were each shrouded under a beautiful, well kept, green and gilt silk cloth. Their purity seemed so at odds with the sad dereliction of the locality, within the 'so-called' Dead Zone and up against the no-mans-land of the Buffer Zone. A mother of three boys had accompanied me into the tomb and she showed her children how to offer prayers and ask for blessings: her hand touching each headstone with a casual gentleness as she made her recitations. She then asked me to photograph her kids, despite knowing that they would only ever see the image on the back of my camera. I was reminded of that time many years ago now when you and I walked in an equally dilapidated area, just a few streets away in what had been the Armenian district of the Old City, and were accosted by a group of children who, after a few words of English were exchanged, gestured for their picture to be taken, and then ran away giggling shyly. I helped the old woman replace the gauze and wood screen over the doorway and lock up, and watched her slowly retreat to her home.

Kirkklar Tekke, North Cyprus, 12th April 2018

The last time you and I came to this beautiful and remote place it was August, and the key-holder to the small mosque was attempting, without much success it seemed, to stop field mice from getting into the building and its subterranean tomb chamber. Do you remember? The barley had not long been cut and the land, which stretches in all directions into the distance with little by way of interruption, was laid bare to the sky. There was simply nowhere else for the poor creatures to find refuge in this land of the migratory hoopoe, the Yialias' dry river course, and of the dead. Today, inside the mosque there was such stillness, as there was too in the underground vault where we first saw the gathered remains of the forty *sahabas* lying at rest under their green silk and gilt-embroidered coverings. It still amazes me to think that these individuals were alive in the 7th century and had known, seen or heard the Holy Prophet Mohammed. Yet to us they are unknown: anonymous. Poignantly, I discovered from the key-holder, who remembered our visit last year, that he says prayers here each evening at *maghrib* for all those who have died nameless, wherever they might lie. This afternoon, while I was in the tomb, I heard the plaintive mews of a ginger and black cat: a new defensive line against the mice, perhaps. Looking for some company, she came out of the darkness and sat by my side and purred. She was pregnant and not far from birthing her young. Her mews were of need, but seemed also to be heralding the imminence of new life in the tomb. Outside the fields of barley were flourishing in the warmth of the spring sun.

Scalan, Braes of Glenlivet, Moray, 7th June 2018

I'm here with B, G, J and A, in this tiny settlement in a remote part of the Cairngorms. Despite the scale of the landscape, this place feels 'held': there's an intimacy here. The buildings are surrounded by a massive range of mountains which, in the winter months, must be pretty bleak. But for now, the hills look like green crushed velvet as cloud shadows move across their surface. The trees to the east provide some shelter, as do the solid stone walls of each of the buildings: the seminary cum farm, the old chapel ruin, the north and south barns with the graffiti we have come to examine, and Sandy's cottage. They form a community – of empty buildings. It's hard to imagine now but this farm was once a busy place. The old cottage, was home to a family of 16 children, 17 if you include the one that died there as an infant. A girl, apparently. Her birth was never registered. It's said that she's buried here somewhere on the farm: her little body a part of the land. The skylarks cry, sheep bleat; the rooks call as do the curlews – their melancholy whistle piercing the air from time to time. And all the while, the stream that once drove the mill wheel in the south barn flows past the picnic table that has become our temporary 'office'. Its tumbling sound and the birdsong provide the constant soundtrack to this place. One feels a different sense of time here. You'd love it.