

Traveler's Tales

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Travel writing from my study abroad experience in London, with the intent of trying out different storytelling styles, organized chronologically.

Fall 2023

The House of Commons and the House of Lords

I found myself wandering the House of Commons and the House of Lords with my little headset on, constantly looking up at the ceiling. So much detail was orchestrated to rarely be seen—but the realization dawned on me that perhaps I assume people didn't always look up because we look down on our phones so often. I wondered how we perceive the world differently, how much more attention we pay attention to the ground than someone who was used to looking at eye level. Maybe sticking to the horizon line gave them a better world view, but I have to believe they still spent a ton of time looking down to ensure they didn't trip on their superfluous clothing.

All of this led me to seeing a little girl with light brown skin in a fluffy pink dress, running around the House of Commons. In my mind's eye, she was quite young and very much a wanderer while her father was busy at work in the House of Lords. I chose to depict her venture.

Marigold in the House of Commons

Pleating flush ruffles between her fingertips

Eyes rolling over to the stars

Hair getting flustered by the circles of the red carpet

Warm brown nail beds lost in fluff and luster

From underneath fanged lashes, she looks up.

Found her eyes still on each carving in each spindle in each corner of the room

Faces delicately mesmerized with oils

Fantasizing about His life in the clouds

There was enough to search for,

To scrutinize

To take into consideration,
The steady hands that spent hours on tall structures,
Swinging for their lives to paint a ceiling.

Squinting...

She shifts her head to stop her hair clip from digging into her skull
Her blush bowed shoes are kicked off,
Socks on display

"Marigold!!" her father calls.

She doesn't move—there are more spindles to count
More noses to access

In an all black robe, he finds his daughter on the floor

"Marigold!!" he drops to his knees.

She blinks in response and he finds her eyes on the stars

Descending to his creaking knees, he falls to the ground next to her with a huff

He adjusts his collar around his neck

Brown loafers kicked off with socks on display

Golden stars hang above but,

Marigold finds his eyes on her.

11:19a.m. 9/4/23

St. Dunstan in the East

St. Dunstan is a Church NorthEast of Southwark in Central London. It was presented to me on tiktok as a place worth seeing with my own eyes, but I found it much more purposeful to feel it in my bones instead.

It is difficult to travel through London and not feel the weight of all of the destruction that came before you and the bodies that have cried in the same place others are bringing a bagged lunch. It is as if these merry-goers cannot feel the withering pain of the earth and the sensation of the sun shining on new plants.

This church in particular was half destroyed in WWII and has since been filled with a garden and outlined with skyscrapers and shiny glass buildings. I have always found myself more appeased by sincere architecture more than any providing tree, but I must admit the fantasy that my lungs breathe in is easier when I am surrounded by ivy and vines alike.

I went on a mission to take pictures for my photojournalism class that was supposed to take place in Southwark, but how could I possibly do that knowing this church garden was now just over the bridge? My mind was made from the start—there wasn't even the illusion of choice at that point.

The church was beautiful and the squirrels were bold. One even poked me as I sat on a step to capture a picture of an archway. An archway that was enraptured by vines. Earlier in the week, I had compared me looking out of my window to a plant with vines clawing at the windowsill to be let out and I thought, looking at this archway, that we had been one in the same. Both I and the plant were now free to crawl in nature.

I hardly thought anyone else enjoying the greenery was thinking about comparing themselves to plants like I was. Most were eating lunch or sitting in the moss in good company. I was alone trying to catch the sun between the cracks in the stone or on the edge of a preserved carved line.

I have been contemplating this experience in depth since, and as I was sitting in class, I was behooved to reflect on how emotional the environment was. The air reached a certain stillness as if the memory continued to plague the dirt I was walking on and the stone of the walls were still heaving heavy sighs after withstanding so much destruction. Teetering on its hinges, the structure is held in place by the vines and trees wrapped tightly around it, covering and consuming as if to heal. Sinisterly as if the plants were pulling the church into ruins in an attempt to fully regrow the slight hill it stands on.

All in all, I found it quite lovely.

And decided again to fill the cracks with more poetry:

Just Visiting

When I found your body laid in stone, roses had grown to protect your bones.

Vines crawled in like a false protector,

armed with thorns and spiked leaves,

Visiting as I do now, too late and with good intentions.

A single beam of light in a forgotten church has fought around the slithering plants to remind you of the warmth you left.

The green blades sprout between the cobblestones to set their traps, but soften your journey back.

When the gravel bites at my knees, the wind sings through the splintering wood to cry your name.

For me—

The sun no longer shines and the moon won't dance, but I will still crawl to ensure the earth doesn't take back your bones,

So the world can't fully take back what was once mine.

10:43am 9/27/23

Rome: Italy Part One

At first, I wasn't going to go. Honestly, there was someone going on the trip I wasn't sure if I could tolerate for five days. I relented and thought maybe I could just go to Rome then fly home when everyone else continued to Naples. I continued to think and came to the conclusion that it was utterly nonsensical to miss out on time in Italy with my friends just because one person threatened to bring the vibe down.

So buying the plane tickets two nights before, the six of us were on our way. The first thing is the immediate warmth of Italy. Especially after being in the rainy melancholy cloud of London, Italy wraps you in a gentle hug. I was fundamentally possessed by the feeling that I was supposed to be here. There was an inherent joy in the land that my soul recognized. Perhaps I had many past lives here, many lives where I was happy, where I was loved, and the Universe did everything she could to make sure that I found my way back somehow in this life. I was so excited to be here.

I was much less excited to drag my carry on over the rickety streets from the metro. The Italian metro was much nicer than the French one, as this one did not appear to have malicious intent.

Our airbnb was light and airy, which gave us a moment's rest before venturing out to our first of many dining establishments where we'd receive a knowing smile with a side of an english menu.

My first trial and tribulation was accidentally ordering a pizza without cheese. Apparently, that was the key difference between a Marinara pizza and a Margarita pizza. Mistakes were made. Mistakes would continue to be made when I accidentally order a pizza without sauce the next day. I can assure you that the first thing I ordered in Naples was an exceptionally ordinary Margarita pizza. It was sensational. Other astonishing eats include, cacio é pepe and a white chocolate filled croissant.

Our first activity was a short hike to the Trevi Fountain. It was hot and swarming with people, but the sculptures being pelted with flying coins were quite stoic. We then shopped and made our way to the Pantheon right before it closed and finished off our night with gelato—as would be a continuous ritual for the next four days.

The next day we were up bright and early for a tour of the Vatican, led by our guide, Carl, who was quick to make many a joke and donate many a fact. Our tour was quite special because we were the only group out of all the bookings that got a bus tour of the gardens. It is so highly sought after and rare enough that Carl was even taking his own pictures, squirming with excitement. Hopping off the bus, we waltzed through the museum, and got a 30 minute explanation of artwork in the Sistine Chapel. Carl was very knowledgeable and very thorough, which was beneficial, but left some of our group members less than pleased when our three hour tour tumbled into five hours. Racing through Saint Peter's Basilica, we got some photos, and I had a nice moment in prayer before rushing off to our cooking class.

In our class, we learned to make tiramisu and pasta. I had my suspicions that pasta was easy to make based on watching Tiktok recipe videos, and I was...completely right. That was not hard.

Even struggling through the process, it is easy to work out your dough and problem-solve. You can totally pull it off if you even try a little. Now, if you want to get into all kinds of funky shapes, that's your business, but we were just making fettuccine. The chefs then took our pasta and cooked it in our chosen sauce. It was absolutely delicious, twisted in ribbons of cream and sprinkles of pepper with grated cheese melting on top of the warm pasta. None of us had eaten since our tour ran long and we devoured. We spent the rest of the night running around the streets of Rome, on the prowl for souvenirs and more gelato, before waking up early to hop on a train to Naples.

Naples: Italy Part Two

I didn't know anything about Naples going in. I knew of Rome because it is clearly one of Italy's most opulent cities, but Naples was new to me. It was here in Naples where I formed a vendetta against cobblestone streets.

After a blissful train ride through the mountains, we arrived in the rain. One harrowing journey of trying to order an Uber to no avail, we got taxis to our airbnb. You can imagine us, cold, wet, beating luggage over stones, and tired. The elevator was also out, forcing us to take the steepest, wobbling stairs I have ever encountered. Luckily we were just on the first floor, but that did not mean I didn't fear for my life with my white-knuckled grip on the hand rail that was falling away from the wall. I crashed into the first bed I saw and was positively ecstatic to have a bed with a blanket, something I had not seen, cozy fabric I had not felt, in seven weeks. I have been sleeping with a sheet in our humble dormitories. I did not get nearly as much sleep as I would have liked to in that bed with our late nights and early call times, but I remain grateful for the two nights I did not have to sleep on my "deflated air mattress" as my friend had explained the way my bed felt different from everyone else's back at school.

The rain lightened up, but that did not stop me from falling twice and slipping three times.

Apparently, my sneakers were not cut out for this environment. I vowed in that moment on the ground that I would never romanticize cobblestone streets in my books ever again and I will be repaving my *Animal Crossing* village with smooth streets as soon as possible.

Aside from the lingering fear in each step, my friends and I had a delightful walk, looking at all the mystical storefronts and cluttered shops bursting at the seams with merchandise.

One of my favorite spots we visited was a bar carved out of an old bookstore. It had the most spectacular ambiance that put us in a sophisticated mood for our wine tasting. We tried a red and a white paired with three types of bruschetta and mozzarella balls that were sublime. The wine was okay. But we learned many fun facts about wine with a trivia game that I won, earning me free gelato courtesy of my friends.

Bright and way too early, we arose the next day for a bus tour of the coast. We visited Sorrento, Positano, and Amalfi. We had about an hour in each location. In Sorrento, we experienced a full tasting in a truffle shop, trying candies, spices, salts, and limoncello. We took pictures at a cafe on the water and sprinted back to the bus. In Positano, we walked from the mountains down to sea level in a winding path through the town. I was able to sit by myself for a moment, letting the salty air dance through my hair to the sound of the rolling waves. Positano is excellent for people watching. On the way back up, I accidentally considered buying earrings that were 940 euros. I missed the “9” on the tag and suddenly understood why the clerk was aghast that I wanted to see that pair in particular. In Amalfi, we were right on the beach. Two of my friends even went into the water which felt exceptionally refreshing in mid October. I facetimed my parents, cheering, “guess where I am?” showing them the stunning view of the coast. I started a trend and everyone else was calling their families and it was such a sweet moment for all of us.

Returning to Naples after such a long day, we ventured out once more to get some seafood. Now, I got the crab pasta and I am from Maryland, a state only known for hacking open crabs and putting Old Bay seasoning on everything. I do not usually partake in the crab feast, as I'm not the biggest fan, but I can tell you that upon seeing the whole crab on my plate, I cracked it open like a true Marylander. My mom was proud of me.

The next day we were on an early flight out and I was left with the feeling of utmost certainty that I would be back.

Starbenders

I don't like spending time alone when I can help it because I have all the time in the world to be alone. I can always choose to be by myself, so usually I am asking everyone in the world to accompany me on my activities before I go alone. Which is exactly what I did before going to a Starbenders concert. I remember buying the ticket in May, anticipating going alone, but I was just so happy that they were going to be in London when I was going to be in London that I didn't care.

Here I now found myself the day off with the realization that I would have to go alone and I was scrambling. I asked every single person I met here if they would go with me. To no surprise no one had heard of the band, but I am the type of person who will just show up to any concert, so I was hoping someone else might be too. They weren't. I spent at least two hours trying to convince my friend to come with me, but she wouldn't. It did not help that this was finals week and most people were getting work done.

I was at a loss. My Dad said maybe I shouldn't go, but I had decided that I was going no matter what because a year before, I had been put in nearly the same position. My friend and I had been

following on Halloween, so the idea of going anywhere alone was terrifying for a good while and I had a concert to go to with no one to go with me. I begged everyone I knew to no avail. I ended up crying on the phone to my parents, locked up in my room, eating the money for the tickets.

This year, I refused to let that happen again. This was the Universe giving me another chance in a safer city and for a band I loved more. So I went.

The concert was at the Boston Music Room and I arrived about 30 minutes after doors opened—standard procedure for a smaller band. I wandered into a surprisingly small room with a bar on one wall, a merch table with one shirt option, and a stage at the front. People ebbing their way through the room, with no rush to get to the front of the stage. The last concert I went to, I had queued six hours early in the sweltering August heat to just get two rows from the front of the stage. Quite the juxtaposition to the people milling about now, taking their sweet time to select the right drink. I am not in the business of drinking alone, so I took my spot smack in the middle, directly in front of the lead singer's microphone. I could not believe the lack of enthusiasm.

As it got closer to show time, the crowd began to fill out, and the photographers swarmed me to take pictures of the opening act. A group of her friends pushed to the front of the stage to cheer her on and their infectious excitement fueled her set. She passed out plastic purple and black roses as she walked through the crowd. I tangled the purple one I received in my necklace, completely unsure of how I was going to carry this for the whole show, but I made it work.

After the opening act ended, the crowd finally moved forward and the whole room was filled and I was there at the front. This was my thirty-second concert and I have never been this close to the stage before. The venue was so small that there wasn't even a barricade.

At the strum of an electric guitar, the band emerged in their full glam-rock splendor and my jaw was on the floor. They were right there. Literally right there!! So close that at one point the guitarist nearly hit me with his guitar when he knelt on the edge of the stage. So close that the lead singer was making eye contact singing together.

At one point, the lead said to the crowd, "let me see the love in London. Give whoever you came with a hug." I, obviously ostentatiously alone, was stark out in the open, so the lead singer, my new best friend, came around the mic and gave me a hug because I was alone. She hugged me!! I nearly cried. I came back home thanking everyone for not coming with me because Kim hugged me because I was alone.

I was singing my heart out the whole time and Kim noticed, so during the one song she let two people sing into the mic and I just so happened to be one of those people. At the end of the show, she even gave me her setlist. I felt so loved and so special. One of the best tights of my life.

I really had my main character moment that night.

Richmond

When I felt the light dawn on my skin, I remembered where my bones were supposed to be.

My travel writing teacher, Brian, lamented during our last class over not having time to take us to Richmond. Enthusiastically, I said we still would be more than happy to go, and the rest of the

class agreed. There was something special about that class in the way that every student cared deeply about what we were doing. We all had chosen to be here and no one regretted their decision, so why wouldn't we want to go on another visit, another adventure as a class.

Well when the email went out, only my two friends, Julia and Harry, decided to be proactive with the scheduling. It ended up just being the four of us, but that was more than fine because the three of us talked the most in class anyways.

Getting on the tube, we expected the journey to be at least an hour endeavor, but Richmond really isn't that far. I had wanted to go because I am a huge fan of the show *Ted Lasso* that takes place in Richmond. There is a pub there and a park that is frequently shot in for scenes of the show. (I actually passed one of the actors, Jeremy Swift, on the street outside of a movie theater the other day, which isn't entirely relevant to the story, but it's a big enough deal; however, not enough content for a whole journal entry, so consider this tidbit bonus material.)

Unbeknownst to me, the pub was happened upon five minutes into our walk off the tube. No one else had seen the show, much to my dismay, so I had a nice ramble of the significance of the atmosphere and validation that it did in fact look as it does on the show. This was a big moment for me.

We continued our walk through a splendor of greenery that emphasized the beauty of London in the fall. The warm leaves were crisp along the river's edge, brightly lit with the sun. We passed both ornate and haphazard boats and a statue of Virginia Woolf. Continuing up a hill, we visited the HollyHock cafe and sat to watch the sun almost completely set at a ripe 4p.m. Before the light fully left us, we made our way to the top of Richmond Hill, meeting the glorious expansive field.

I spun with my arms outstretched on the edge of the path, peaking at the light bending over the edges of buildings and rippling with the corner of the river. I was practically walking home backwards, taking it all in and taking pictures nonstop. It was peaceful and I was jubilant. I will hopefully be going back Thursday.