

Back from Nigeria, 1979 (Part #3):

This final segment telescopes the final month of the return journey, culminating in a flying bus trip from London to Istanbul and back:



Feb. 25 (*la frontera Francesa to Paris*)

I disembarked from *el ferrocarril Española* at Hendaye in mid-afternoon and crossed *la frontera* into France. Stymied by the sticky French ticket computer, I bought a ticket only to Bordeaux.

Just 2½ hours later as the train slid into Bordeaux, I was dozing. I started up, jostling down the aisle with my hockey bag. Alas, the stop was scarcely more than sixty seconds.

In frustration I watched the Bordeaux cityscape dissolve. Not only would I have enjoyed exploring for a day but I could also have called the young woman who shared her Ducado filters through the night in Las Palmas airport. Hardly five minutes later, I was still standing helpless between coaches when the conductor came round checking tickets. With my stilted French unequal to explaining my error— I was mercilessly charged a 50% fine on the entire fare to Paris: nearly \$60 US. Why in hell hadn't I the presence of mind to buy the ticket only to the next station? For the following eight hours on the cramped train I stewed over the latest folly.

February 26-27 (*Paris*)



Arriving in Gare Montparnasse round 9:15 PM I stepped into the frosty air of *la ville des allumes* and took the Paris Metro to the Bastille station. For a shabby room of marginal decency I paid 120 francs. Still, it was Paris! In the morning I had coffee and rolls at the

bedside table—even made a point of drinking a glass of tap water recalling Orwell’s great observation that ‘*Every molecule in this great city has passed through innumerable bodies.*’ (Did I ingest a molecule of Descartes or Hugo?)

On the street next morning by 9:30 AM, I lit out for Champ d’ Elysees Wide-eyed and shivering, I hiked through the *Musee de Impressionisme* and Le Louvre, a little fazed and jaded before the surfeit of great works. After all I was just another clustering tourist ant on the sugar mound of *haut culture*.

The most memorable Louvre exhibit was the original dress, modeled for Degas’ Ballerina, now rotting away— as are the bones of the little Ballerina herself—while the girl in the painting remains eternally fresh.

I walked around 8:00 PM before heading back to the hotel neighbourhood. To save a few francs, I got a cheaper room in the hotel annex and then headed out for a glass of green *chartreuse* liqueur in a neighbourhood bar (atmosphere at \$10/hour just a little too pricy). Walking back through Bastille Square, I witnessed a fellow tourist, face bright red, stretchered out from a café into an ambulance (Perhaps like Jim Morrison he got his wish—to die in Paris!)

Before entering the smoky fumes of the room (strongly suggesting that the lower tariff was due to a recent fire) I looked down through the dumb waiter shaft to see a Quasimodo face leering back...



Up and out by 9:00 AM, I witnessed the spire of Notre Dame emerging from the morning fog and shed a tear for the real Quasimodo in the drowning sound from the cathedral bell tower.

I made a quick sprint around the Indian exhibit at the Musee Pompidou in Les Halles—possibly the closest I’ll get to the orient, this visit. Afterwards, outside the grand edifice (reminiscent of a pulp mill without the smokestacks), I watched the buskers braving the cold and tossed a few francs to the brave folkloric flutist while he blew on his fingers.

Later in the afternoon, even as the sky turned ever greyer, I succumbed to the basic Paris day-tripper amusement—the boat ride up the Seine. In the chill wind, segregated on a long seat from fellow tourists (reserved for *les handicapes*?) I was not amused.

Still, my most memorable Paris moment was to come:

In picking my way out of the crowded restaurant where I'd dined on bread and soup (the cheapest offering on the menu)— my empty sleeve accidentally knocked over a breadbasket. I was almost at the door when the waiter turned and saw the bread spilled onto the floor and me rushing away. Just then laughter sprang from behind me. In the nearby table, a young man was pointing at the floor and the girl beside him was nearly exploding in hilarity. I pushed through across the crowded room and out the door still followed by her hideous laughter. Had *le spectacle grotesque* of my clumsiness illustrated some point in a philosophical discussion?

Within the hour I took the metro to *Gare du Nord* and waited for the Dunkerque train. Teeth chattering and belly shivering, I had had for the nonce, a bellyful of the City of Lights.



February 28 (*Paris- London*)

As the train pulled away at dusk, I found myself in sharing a compartment with an odd little group of travelers: Sitting across was a sweet Indonesian girl breaking away from her abusive French husband (wiping eyes as the train cleared the station). Beside her was a pair of fun-loving Italian shop girls with thick eyebrows and lustful leers (“*Poosh, poosh, poosh in the boosh, boosh, boosh!*” they chanted practicing naughty English).

Sharing my side was an amicable Nottingham rugby player cradling his duty-free bottle of Courvoisier and carton of Marlboros. As the only fellow native English speaker, I was button-holed for the entire journey in a conversation ranging from Britannia’s decline to the historical perfidy of the froggies.

The landing on Albion’s shore provided a spitting image of the old stereotype: a putty-faced bobby chewing on his chinstrap, hands behind back pacing the foggy platform.

After shuffling in chilly queues for customs inspection, we were finally off to London in a train coach with black velvety upholstery reminiscent of hearse décor. Two hours after landing at Dover, I was at a café outside Victoria Station sitting down to a full-English breakfast, along with friendly fascist seat mate to whom I immediately afterwards bade farewell. (Only after the encounter it occurred that he might have been gay).

March 1-5 (London)



Ensnorced by mid-afternoon in an Indian-run bed and breakfast in Earl's Court, by 5:00 PM I was curled snoozing by the gas fire.

Out fresh in the morning for "shopping", I tramped Oxford St. to search for a raincoat. Burberrys' being so far beyond my budget, I settled for one squeezed into the sales rack at a discount clothing shop. While certainly not "famous blue raincoat" quality—at least here there was the charm that it was procured in London.

Checking travel agents, I was dismayed by the fares—options I'd considered like Cairo or Bombay being so far beyond my means—I wondered whether I was facing a bitter mid-winter return to Canada.

I spent the rest of the day on the underground, riding aimlessly and burrowing up occasionally to blink in the greyish London light. I did drop into the Tate Gallery to see the Blake etchings. While in awe of his drawings there was the touch of gloomy *deja vu*, in seeing the Gainsborough, and Constable originals of the lithographs recalled from the dun living room walls of early childhood. Rossetti's *Death of Ophelia* was more arresting, even with the touch of Norton Anthology of English Literature earnestness.

In late afternoon, I stopped by a pub for a lager striking up a conversation with an old man at the bar rail. Within ten minutes of chatting (starting with his fears of reignited German fanaticism) he told me that he'd recently discovered that his beloved wife was dying of cancer. He went on to confess that he was already weighing the thought of taking his own life. He even confided to me—a perfect stranger—that poison was his preferred method.

After the poor old fellow with a shuddering handshake sidled off, the next gent who edged up beside me was a Dover Customs' officer and after him a Jamaican immigrant, both apprehensive about the rise of Margaret Thatcher, the right winger favoured to win the coming general election. All this over two ales in little over an hour. How likely in a North American bar would one be privileged with such encounters?

Unfortunate that such poignant pub chats are so conducive to huffing cigarettes. Thus, in walking back to my room, I threw my fresh pack of Rothmans down a stairwell in disgust.



Back out early for more shopping— I got a pair of half-length ‘Docs’ (which looked like Frankenstein shoes) and put them on only to discover five steps out the shoe store door that the high uppers painfully chafed my calves. I doubled back and attempted to exchange them for the ankle-length style but the salesman adamantly refused to take them back (“Can’t do it after they’ve been worn on the street, sir!”). After spending nearly two hours searching for a cobbler to cut off the tops (“We don’t do uppers”, said one shoe repair man) I began to understand the vengeful anti-union Thatcherist tide.

Still wearing my new calf-cutting Frankenstein boots, I stopped in at Selfridges’ cafeteria for lunch, at a counter no less gloomy than that of a Canadian Woolworths’. Spooning salty chicken soup I overheard the snatches of conversation from the young woman and man across. They both wore nametags.

In their chatter about an upcoming holiday in Spain, I caught what I assumed to be dreary glimpses of the scope of pleasure for the clerical class of this crowded isle. A few bedroom jollies before forty, occasional winter getaways to a tepidly sunny destination or a jaunt across the channel for a few duty-free bottles of grog (like that of the Nottingham fascist); all in all— a decent allotment to be enjoyed prior to cremation. What more might one expect among 60,000,000 on a crowded isle? Maybe I’ve been reading too much Orwell...

Luckily, I was able find at a Piccadilly underground travel agency an option for delaying the return to Canada by a couple of more weeks. For a fairly modest sum, I booked a return a bus ticket to Athens leaving on Saturday night.



With two days left to cram in London before the hop back across the channel, I went into tourist overdrive, “doing” in one morning both the Victoria and Albert Museum and Saint Paul’s cathedral.

A conversation struck up outside the St. Paul cathedral steps with an aging hippie standing beside a Hare Krishna display took a strange turn: When I drew a parallel between the depiction of a strawberry held by the Bodhisattva in the poster on the table before us and the depiction of the strawberries in the art of Hieronymus Bosch (recently seen at El Prado), the old bastard asked with a leer if I’d like to accompany him home. He was nonetheless, embarrassed and apologetic when he immediately realized that he had grossly misinterpreted an “American” tourist’s eagerness to chat. Nonetheless, I was jarred by the second such come-on in the last few days. I resolved to be more cautious...

Later in the afternoon, I got to the Highgate Cemetery to see the Karl Marx tomb but arrived a half-hour after the closure of the gate. When I asked directions of the man walking his dog nearby, he was bemused by what he took as another naïve young Commie attempting a pilgrimage to the shrine of his saint.

“We get loads from all over the world coming here every day,” he chuckled pulling on his leash.

March 6-7 (*London- Athens*)



I made it 2 hours early to the bar at King’s Cross Station for the rendezvous with the blue ‘Consolas’ Bus. After yet one more greasy meal of fish n’ chips, I squeezed into the coach beside a young bibliophile from Bradford called Nigel and blabbed with him all the way to Dover. Recalling the queasiness of the last crossing: for the lurch to Calais, I shared with him the price of a tube of Graval, purchased from the kiosk.

Re-boarding the bus at 2:00 AM with the heater knocked out, we froze until dawn on the *autoroute* to Paris. Bypassing the City of Lights, we pushed straight through towards Lyon. In keeping with the friendly and cheery vacation mood, I chatted with fellow passengers during the rest stops:

Along with Nigel, (with his guitar, looking like an elfin version of Donovan), I chatted with an Irish hippie farmer couple; a graduate student with wife and two babies; a blonde couple from Minnesota off to an Israeli Kibbutz; a red headed Orphan Annie from Michigan. Then there was the short blonde girl from Australia seemingly attempting to set a world time record in obtaining passport stamps.

Through the day in the mid-front row, I wheedled *tabac*, scanned the Penguin *Koran* and *the Geography of African Affairs* (both bought in Foyles). Most memorable in looking up from my paperbacks as the scenery rolled past was beholding the *Italia frontera*, high in the Alps, starlit and snowy. Afterwards we sped through the Mont Blanc tunnel and onto the Italian *Autostrada*.

In stopping at the rest stop for a late dinner, I shared a table and chewed on a square of plastic lasagna along with the graduate student. He informed that he was escaping the British drear for a Greek isle in order to polish off his doctoral thesis on Wole Soyinka. He and his wife seemed embarrassed when I brought up my Nigeria connection—as if the

sacred domain of their research could be so casually encroached upon by an ‘*Amurican*’ tourist...



At Milano at 1:00 AM the driver parked for the night and suggested a cheap hotel. Most of the passengers, after thirty cramped hours, were glad for the break. While they shuffled off, a few of us saved on a hotel bill by spending the night in the unheated Milano train station.

In the company of the Australian girl and the Irish hippie couple, the chilly night went passably enough. When we started back on the road at 8:00 AM, I temporarily had my own seat to curl up for cap-naps. In crossing the flatlands towards the Adriatic coast, luckily, I was awake for the Turner Impressionist view of Venezia rolling past.

By noon, we were under the red star at the Yugoslav border. Pooling spare change, we copped two pounds of black-market dinars, which was enough to communally “feast” in the Yugoslavia café rest stop. Famished, I may have not only taken more than my share but seemingly put off the British scholar’s appetite by dipping into the breadbasket with “dirty” left hand.

Through the afternoon we passed apartment blocks of Zagreb (“the east European condo look” in the Minnesota kids’ parlance) and by nightfall, into the Croatian mountains. Having snoozed through the rest stop, I was stuck with bursting bladder for more than eight hours through snowy mountain landscape. In the middle of the freezing night, I offered to share my seat and sleeping bag cover with the chubby Australian girl who was grateful that I had no ulterior aims.

By the time we rolled to the rest stop at dawn, I had a bellyache and an evil throat—wherein the first scratches of a flu-bug were taking hold. With just a few sodden handfuls of toilet paper, I sniffled through to the Grecian frontier. The rest of the morning through the rocky green of Macedonia, my sinuses were plugged and ears buzzing. By our midnight arrival in Athens I was punched out, groggy and feverish. Desperate for the nearest and cheapest mattress, I barely managed to stagger off the bus in the rain.

March 8-10 (*Athens*)



I woke early the next morning in the double room near the bus station shared with the Bradford Donovan. Although fever-blown and squeezed on the shoestring budget, I crawled off to find a single room in the Hotel Georgios. I curled up for the day with the roll of toilet tissue and tried to sweat it out.

Still, I was in Athens—maybe a once in a lifetime visit. Even if moribund— not an hour was to be wasted. Thus, at 4:00 PM, I dragged myself up and stumbled up through the Plaka towards the Acropolis. While shuffling around the Acropolis, I bumped into Nigel and the Australian girl in a cafe under the Parthenon shadow.

Surprised in hearing the steep cost of my single in the Hotel Georgios, Nigel invited me to walk back with him to check out the (not so) Funny Trumpet guesthouse where he and the Australian girl were staying. In seeing and smelling the backpacker dormitory, I realized that so matter how tight the budget shoestring— privacy was worthy paying four-fold the dorm rate.

Next morning, I met up again with Nigel and “did” the Archeological museum and afterwards stepped into a Greek Orthodox Church in the midst of a service. In a waft of incense, I sneaked away back to my cot in the Georgios. At 9:00 PM that night, there came a gentle tap on the door. It was Bradford Nigel and Australian Audrey:

“We’re heading for Naxos tomorrow morning. Just thought we’d drop by to say goodbye.”

I bade mutual farewell to these Consolas bus travel mates who had just taken up a joint adventure.



Next morning, I trudged solitaire through downtown Athens with only one mission: to find tissue paper to blow my nose. I couldn’t even locate a supermarket or pharmacy so had to buy an expensive drink in Sytagma Square, just for the napkins. Afterwards in the national botanical gardens, I searched for shrubbery with broad and soft leaves.

Finally near desperation in the Byzantine museum, I managed to steal half a roll of lavatory paper from the tourist toilet stall.

With such relief, I turned closer attention to the artifacts:

Considering the Byzantine crosses so intricately crafted, I wondered whether the artisans felt boredom or drudgery in the months of their work. Amid the repetitive dreariness of their labours had it ever even fleetingly crossed the minds of those craftsmen to abandon the “old” design of their training—and try something bolder and more imaginative? Very appropriate, it seemed, that “Byzantine” has the connotation of elaboration and intricacy of design that verges on collapsing under its own weight...

I ended the afternoon by paying brief homage to Lord Byron amid the Sopwith Camel biplanes at the Greek War Museum.



March 11-14 (*Athens- Istanbul*)

Possibly it was the dead-wait in Almeria that had given me the urge to stay on the move as long as the cash held out. Even with the dwindled resources (realizing of course, that after making my way back to London, the Atlantic remained to be crossed) I decided against a week on a Greek isle and elected instead to bus further east to Istanbul.

At 1:30 PM, I caught the bus at Armonia Station. Over the 22-hour bus trip that followed, I wound north along the Aegean toward Salonika (getting peeks of Mount Olympus through the clouds) accompanied by Greek music on the cassette player.

I also met new company who proved quite as interesting as the last group of fellow bus travellers: Among them was a sad Armenian American teacher, wheezing in his Camel plain ends and talking of the massacre of his compatriots by the Turks. Then there was Bengt, the Swedish Ornithologist who'd worked in Kenya. It was with Bengt that I was to share a double in the Hotel Saudel after we finally reached Istanbul in the middle of a coal-smoky freezing night.



Waking in a bunk bed in drab morning light, I was strangely charmed by the slouch-cap haggard-faced dirty-thirties feel of Istanbul. While overtly ‘western’, the dominating impression was that Turkey was as Muslim as Spain is Catholic.

Still, with apparently 20% unemployed- it felt like hard times. Yet despite the baggy pant shuffles and slouch caps— there were disarming smiles! Hard to forget the little dark-haired secretary in a headscarf sitting on the park bench without an escort—with only her few words of English—what sweetness she imparted in our exchange of greetings.

Another paradox amid the overt grimness and pollution was the bounty of the Turkish soil. The market where we got our morning cup of tea and sweet roll was bulging with the heftiest tomatoes and fattest carrots I’d ever seen. Yet this cornucopia on display seemed to be out of reach of most of the hands stuffed in baggy pockets.

Meanwhile, at nearly every major intersection there were parked tanks with fatigue-dressed soldiers peering out from the hatchways. Even at the cobblestone corners of side streets, soldiers were sentried before machine guns. There was no need to be reminded that the country was under martial law.

Harkening to Chile, ’76— there seemed to be larger (dare I say Byzantine?) machinations at work. With the Iranian revolution seething on the eastern border, the western alliance seems to be mortified by the risk that Islamic revolution could spill into Turkey. So once again this century, is Turkey bearing the mantle of the *‘Sick man of Europe’*?

Still, unlike in Chile three years ago, it was not marks of fear or terror that were detectable in the passing faces— but rather the grey weariness of economic hardship.



Meanwhile, as I indulged in these shaky conjectures, I partook of the tourist highlights that my slim budget allowed. First up was a walk-through St. Sophia:

In the dim interior of the grand Byzantine cathedral that was converted into an even grander mosque, a guide in stumbling English pointed to the slash mark on the foundation pillar. According to local belief, the mark was of the sword of the Magnificent Suleiman, who struck the foundation from his reared back steed, twelve feet above the floor. Another version of the same myth (provided by a couple of high School kids practicing English and scouting for a few lira) explained the oblong hole in the midst of another marble pillar was also the mark of Suleiman when he plunged in his index finger and with a mighty whoop, spun the Byzantine Cathedral around 3 times transforming Hagia Sophia from a Christian to a Muslim holy place (Hearing this, I recalled the legends of the Micmac hero-god, Glooscap).

Not to settle for new wine in old skins, Suleiman and the Ottomans apparently then set out to enhance the magnificence of old Byzantium. Thus, across the square from St. Sophia is Suleiman's own appointed creation—calculated to exceed in splendor, St. Sophia's. In my most humble touristic view—he succeeded. In fact, I could hardly keep my eyes off the Blue Mosque. With its honeycombed domes and slender muezzin towers—in its otherworldliness and grace—the Blue Mosque was the most magnificent work of architecture I have yet beheld.

So with the aid of the guidebook of Bengt, the bird-biologist, I nibbled through four days of Istanbul's glories. Stopping predictably at notable highlights: the market, the university, the Suleiman Mosque, the archeological museum, a Turkish bath—even the Pudding Shop meeting venue on the hippie backpacker trail.

Still, for want of a few Turkish lira (I had not the courage to ask the Swede room sharer for a small loan) I had to forgo the blockbusting Topkapi palace. I could only loiter pathetically at the entrance wicket for a half-hour, trying to peer through the gate.

Apart from benefitting from his guidebook, in those few days of shared accommodation with the Swedish birdman, I did enjoy some political conversation—and the shared socialist (dare I say dilettantish?) sympathies.

On the last afternoon before parting company (he east to Ankara; me on the bus back to Athens) we took the ferry across the Bosphorus to set foot in Asia. For a half hour, we walked along the eastern shoreline before overshadowing blocks of condos with seagulls screeching and drunks snoozing under the echoing urine-tainted piers. Boldly amid that gloom was a hammer and sickle on the pier column chalked in dark red.

On the ferry back to the European side, there came twinges of regret for missing the opportunity to travel further east. Will there be another chance?



March 15-21 (*Istanbul-Athens-London-Vancouver*)

Subsisting on Turkish hazelnuts and raisins on the long bounce back to Athens—I sat across from a glib shrill-voiced Albertan and a lame-legged American folksinger gal with a guitar. In the middle of the night, the would-be Joanie Mitchell—presumably about to be taken advantage of by the cowboy—unexpectedly slipped out from under his blanket to cuddle with me. It was not the first time to have mixed feelings about being taken to be more ‘honourable’ than a neighbouring ‘bad boy’.

After bidding goodbye to the folkstress in Athens (she off to Rhodes) I checked back into the dreary Georgios to clean up and shave. Although more than twenty-four hours sleepless, I took a bus to Piraeus—to check out the point of departure for the island journeys I was to miss. On the bus I nodded off and struggled to avoid toppling into the aisle.

Back at the Georgios, I immediately collapsed and slept through the afternoon and night. I woke with just enough time to clean up and pack for the long haul back to London. Only after boarding the blue Consolas bus at noon, did I remember leaving the scout knife, the parting gift of Tamar O. in Hadejia, in the Georgios bathroom. The eyes misted in the realization that it was too late to run back.



All the way the Greek peninsula and back through Yugoslavia to the Italian *Autostrada* I read my ‘*Geography of African Affairs*’ and chatted intermittently with Philip, the stout Greek bus conductor, who whined of his marital problems. When we stopped in Milano in the middle of the night—the friendly Philip—unlike the conductor on the trip down—allowed us to sleep on the locked bus. The next morning, we hit the Mont Blanc tunnel in brilliant sunshine and then emerged in drizzle on the French side. We zipped north to Lyon and hit a foggy Paris at midnight. This time, the bus took a route straight through

the Champ D'Elysees. One of the four Australian backpacker gals almost broke her neck in craning to catch a glimpse of the Eiffel tower.

From the outskirts of Paris to the Calais Ferry (reached at 4:00 AM) I chatted with the backpacker girl who sat across the aisle, one Lynn from Mount Isa, Queensland. Apart from her racist comments ("Are you for the aboriginals? "I'm not!") she had a kind—albeit anxious— face.

After landing at Dover in a grey dawn, we waited an hour for the bus to a grimy London. I shared a taxi with Lynn to Earl's court, arranging to meet that night.

Intending to fly out early on the morrow, I headed off to London Museum (nodding off again in the metro) then picked up a few more books at Foyles.

Just as back in the Louvre, I was struck by the ironies of history: Is it just too facile— too woodenly Marxist— to suppose that the grandeur of London and Paris is built largely on the stolen treasure of empire? Are the achievements of civilization and high-culture invariably based on predation? Considering that, can any 'civilization' be achieved without exploitation? (Therein I also recalled the display in the Athens museum detailing how Pericles in 450 BC built the Parthenon with gold and silver embezzled from the Delian League). In the wake of such speculations there was a momentary hunger for the study of economics...

By late afternoon I was back in my bed and breakfast room doing some laundry in the sink and taking a nap before meeting Australian Lynn. At the appointed 8:00 PM she arrived all smiles and we headed out in a taxi for a snack.

Over a pizza (aware I was down to my last few bucks, she generously paid) I listened as she poured out her story: She told of her 21-year-old brother dying last year from a car accident after eight months in a coma. She said that the driver of the car, the brother of a girl her late brother had impregnated, was a drunken remorseless bastard with "*Abi blood*". For his negligence the boy was sent to prison for manslaughter. Lynn also spoke of her father, a Bulgarian war refugee, who hadn't spoken to mom or the kids for years (sound familiar?)

On numerous coffee refills, we chatted until nearly midnight. It was only the need to be at the Pan American desk by 6:00 AM that prevented me from asking her asking her back to my room. The farewell embrace in the taxi, made it obvious that she was more than willing. Thus, was racked up another unconsummated opportunity to haunt...



Out before dawn to Victoria Station, I slogged through the rain to the Pan American office for a standby ticket, London-Seattle, departing at 10:00 AM. With ticket in hand, I headed back to the bed and breakfast for an hour's rest, then gathered my bag and walked down Earl's Court for the airport bus to Heathrow. At the airport, I joined a monstrously long Custom's queue wherein a Yankee bitched about 'socialist Britain'. Unfortunately, that sentiment seems to be widely shared by Brits if the prominence of advertising on the tube is any indication. Posters showing the new Conservative leader, Margaret Thatcher, bore the message:

'Getting fed up? Not much longer to wait!'

Finally, through customs and boarded, I settled in for the long flight. For the following 9 ½ eerie sunlit hours across the North Atlantic and Greenland, I read through a stack of magazines and the Penguin *Anthology of Canadian Poetry*. Meanwhile, we crawled 30,000 feet above a vista of ice, dark ocean and mountain glaciers all the way from southern Greenland to the edge of the North Pacific.

After breezing through an efficient American Customs in SEATAC Airport, I boarded another airport bus to the downtown Seattle Greyhound. Two hours later, we pulled up to the Canadian border post at White Rock, B.C. where we lined up with our luggage at the side of our bus waiting for the inspection. In their odd green uniforms, the Canada Customs officers almost looked like bread truck drivers.

There was hardly a glimmer of emotion in crossing the border after the hiatus of more than two years from the northern homeland. Still, through the sunset from White Rock to Vancouver, I was grateful for the mild spring weather.

In stepping onto the platform at the downtown Greyhound station—I swallowed back a ghostly reminder of the arrival back from Latin America three years ago (The hope is that this time, the skin is thicker).

With my last American quarter, I phoned KG, the biologist acquaintance in Kitsilano. With the alternative being a skid row hotel room, I had already decided to take him up on his kind offer to put me up for a few days. I received his letter just a few days before leaving Hadejia and had scribbled him a postcard from Istanbul informing that I would be arriving soon.

Within a half hour he arrived at the bus station to pick me up accompanied by a younger 'musician' friend. What relief there was in their warm greeting! Even though the rapport

had a shaky start a lame joke about my “schizophrenic postcard from Turkey” there was enough good will for mutual accommodation.

Back in his living room in Kitsilano, I reluctantly joined him in sipping a tot of whisky while we chatted for an hour. Remembering the caution against the tendency of ‘RVs’ (return volunteers) to ramble on—I avoided talking about Nigeria.

After KG went to bed at 9:00 PM, I sat alone in the living room— dazed yet insomniac with jet lag. Flipping through his TV channels, I settled on a blank screen with white noise.

Fini



From blue checkered hard-cover notebook (transcribed 2015)