St. John’s Wood

Every morning I paid
for breakfast at Café Rouge
with tips earned pulling pints
for the wealthy the night before.
I kept cool while they blabbered
about the glories of the Empire
and haughtily called me a colonial.

I shared a room with a Canadian
and two racist South Africans
next door to farm-raised Kiwis.
We drank together after closing time,
united in our whinging about the Poms.

I blew fifty quid on drinks
for two delectable Nova Scotians
just arrived from a gig in Galway
despite not having Buckley’s.

I shared newspapers in the library
with moneyed elderly gentlemen
who read the Financial Times
and muttered about selling another Jag.

On my days off, I walked
through Primrose Hill to Camden Town
where I bought a CCCP t-shirt,
Docs, used Levis and second-hand
Australian novels, saw Nick Cave
getting cash from an ATM,
got hammered in The World’s End.

I bought international phone cards
from surly Pakistani newsagents,
made homesick midnight calls
to family, mates and old flames
in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra.
I slept in other people’s beds or dossed in share-houses in Willesden Green, Islington, Watford and Bayswater, sometimes with an ex-ballerina from Altona, but usually alone.

On the day I moved out, I walked to the tube station through floating snow, on my way to Gatwick and a plane waiting to take me home to summer.

Ayr

The bus from Glasgow to Stranraer terminated unexpectedly in Ayr, stranding us amidst beauty.

All of the accommodations were full, so after a cheap dinner we bought cans of Tennent’s

and found a secluded site on the beach and drank away hours of northern twilight.

Towards midnight, we unfurled sleeping bags on the sand, pushed passports, pounds and pence down to safety with our feet, positioned our backpacks as pillows and went to sleep hoping to remain undisturbed. We were woken at dawn by council workers collecting rubbish on the beach

and the sun rising over the Firth of Clyde and the Isle of Arran as we stared in wild wonder.

Homage
Mouquet Farm, Pozieres, France

Early September on the Somme
and it’s pouring with rain
Twenty-three thousand
of my countrymen
died here
over forty-one days
fighting over paddocks
between this ridge
and that windmill
a distance of less than a kilometre

I’m paying homage
to my great-grandfather George
and his mates who suffered here
travelling from memorial to memorial
from cemetery to swollen cemetery
horrified by the stupidity
of the whole bloody thing

George survived the Somme
and made it home to raise merinos
in the Western District of Victoria
where his Sunday-best suits
were tailor-made by Fletcher Jones
with wool from his own farm
but the mustard gas wrecked his lungs
and he died young anyway
unable to escape the consequences
of other men’s mistakes
Cupcakes and Monsters

*For Celeste*

Drawing cupcakes and monsters
on the back of a discarded copy
of the Jerilderie Letter,
you are unaware of its significance,
of the power of words
to span centuries and continents.
Grasping your crayons,
you are unaware of your family history,
your dual nationality,
your roots in Ireland, Wales, England,
the Netherlands and Australia.
For now, your world is immediate
and you are unencumbered.

*Nathanael O'Reilly*