

Rapid movement over a landscape

Words by Sophie Ruigrok

Monday, last week of August

Woke up this morning and both my arms were numb. Tried to writhe but couldn't move.

Tuesday, last week of August

Woke up this morning to damp sheets beneath me. Had soaked through them in the night. Weather's now alarmingly hot in London: 38 degrees.

Spent the day slumped over my laptop in a hotel lobby in Brixton. Good air-conditioning there. Restless by the evening though, so wandered towards Camberwell.

Hot, heavy sky. Air thick. Unbreathing. I passed by bars where people were grasping wildly at the last days of summer. Feverish. Manic. Wrecked faces, red mouths hanging open. August feels like the end of nights to me. People pushing the party at 5am, but fraying at the edges. Ready for the cool balm of winter. For sleep.

Wednesday, last week of August

Woke up this morning to the residue of sticky dreams. Lots of them. One with my body scattered in various locations across London. My head drifting down the canals of Hackney, buoyant, rhythmically knocking against sheet piles. My left leg on its own journey, up and down the Victoria line. And my fingers, swollen in the heat, laying neatly in a desk drawer on Coldharbour Lane.

In the afternoon, I met Jake in Soho.
How are you? he said
Something about this weather makes me feel funny, I said
What kind of funny? He said
Like, not-really-here-funny, I said
Oh, I get that, he said. That's how I feel when I have serious conversations with my boyfriend.

We sat side by side on high chairs in the café at Arket, picking at cold salads and staring out of

the wide windows that give onto Regent Street. A tangled mass of bodies was moving quickly in front of us, faces coming thick and fast, the air so humid around them that they generated a sort of slipstream in their wake.

We argued for a few minutes about how hot one of the men in the crowd was, and then started doing an online quiz.

*Do you feel like the world around you is unreal?
Do you feel as though you are watching yourself in a film?*

Do you find yourself feeling disconnected from parts of your body?

Later, I went to the studio and called Aurea while I was painting. Told her about my dream and she told me about hers.

All my teeth were loose in my mouth, she said
That's a classic, I said
But all my teeth were loose in my mouth and I pulled one out and I discovered it was actually a brittle, curly seashell. Then I kept pulling more and more out, and each was a unique but still-brittle seashell. I tried to hold them between my fingers, but they crumbled and disappeared.
That's disgusting, I said
Yes, she said

Thursday, last week of August

Woke up this morning and felt like the sky had slid inside my mouth and stuck there, coating it with a musty film. Checked my teeth instinctively. Looked down at my pale, naked body and understood I needed a change. Googled sunbeds and decided to go to one, which was strange as this was something I had never done before in my entire life.

Walked through Ruskin Park to get there. Entered via the Northway Road entrance. Hoards of children were darting purposefully between scorched umber grass and a filthy paddling pool, their elated screams unsettling. I moved through them, past the tennis courts, and

eventually stopped to watch the tensile bodies of athletic men swinging from monkey bars in the playground. They were doing some extreme form of calisthenics, the caustic sunlight catching on the curves of their flesh, shuddering as it located the pooling sweat at the base of their necks, the centre of their chests, the backs of their shins.

The sunbed felt good. New. But when I got home and looked at myself in the mirror I realised that eight minutes had done little to affect the sort of change I had needed.

I lay on my bed thinking for a while. Eventually, I booked a Eurostar ticket to Belgium leaving the next morning.

Friday, last week of August

Woke up this morning to an overcast sky that held the heat in. Took two trains to Kings Cross. On the Eurostar, I inserted my body between a family of three who spoke Spanish and laughed generously. I pressed my hot cheek to the cold window on my right. Looked at Reddit. Looked at a subreddit of cloud photos. Looked at a subreddit of natural phenomena. Looked at a photo that someone had posted from Chengdu which showed seven suns setting over a hazy, geometric skyline. Someone commented that this was an optical illusion created by the refraction of light. Someone else commented that in the past this would have been regarded as convincing evidence of an apocalypse, or the existence of God.

I got lost in the view through the window, Britain's placid landscape washing over me. Grey. Green. Grey. Green. The train sank down into the tunnel. Hundreds of metres beneath the earth. Sleep took over eventually.

At around 10am, I woke up somewhere in the Belgian countryside, the sun now forcing its way through sheets of cloud. Around me, swathes of turned earth. Corn, turgid and orderly. Ugly little grey houses with new bricks that hadn't been worn. Occasionally, better houses that buckled.

I watched distant runners glide through long grass and along railway tracks, and white cows whip their tails against their rears. It had been a while since I'd seen a cow, or much nature at all. I hadn't escaped from London's tall walls

in months. Sometimes, though, I would wander to an industrial estate behind my studio where there was an unexpected patch of grass gave onto a river, and two empty chairs which were continuously being angled to face the sun. I would sit on one of the chairs sometimes, in that strange place, and stare at the rushing water and listen to its sound as it tumbled down and crashed into metal gates. It made me feel at ease. Like white noise videos on the internet. Like this rumbling train beneath me.

Saturday, last week of August

Woke up this morning and the air in Belgium was cooler. Staying at my grandmother's house in Ghent. Dense house, stone walls, dark wood furniture. A dirtied icon above my bed. My dad's paintings from the 80s. Gentle bells ringing from the nearby church. I slept for eleven hours last night.

At the breakfast table with my family, I drank coffee and ate thin slices of toast with cheese.

I'm going to Antwerp, I said
Ok, they said

In Antwerp, I rented a Dutch bike and rode it through efficient, ample streets. Cold air against my face. Rush of adrenaline. A shedding of all that dust I had gathered lately.

I made my way to the museum, the KMSKA. On the ground floor, skin. Rubens' fat flesh. Corinth, his figures sallow and spayed. Cranach, milky white faces and limbs. Then, a miraculous Van Eyck. Upstairs, a room of seascapes. Five by the Belgian painter Constant Permeke. I wanted to fall into them. Exhausted surfaces. Viscous slabs of dark paint, shifting into grey-pinks, grey-greens, grey-blues. A violent orange mark where the sun would be.

Late afternoon, I met Camille and her friends in a bar somewhere in the city. We hadn't seen each other for five years.

Oh my god, I said. You're pregnant
Yes, she said

Strangers handed me strong Belgian beers and Camille and I caught up. We spoke about our lives, hiking in the UK, property prices, deep fake

videos. I thought about how changed she was and pressed my hand onto her swollen belly. I looked around the table of Camille's friends and saw tenderness, couples stroking each other's faces, kissing. I realised it had been a long time since I'd kissed anyone and memories surged forwards. Searching fingers running along the flanks of a stomach, flitting into the damp hollow of an armpit, finding the inside of a wet mouth. I thought about the last person I was seeing and the way he would pluck the tears from my cheeks and deliver them, one-by-one, to his ready tongue.

After sunset, Camille's friend Max invited us to his flat for buttermilk potatoes and eggs. We ate, got drunk and talked at length about mountaineers and their death wishes.

Sunday, first week of September

Woke up and it was the first day of September.

Returned to the breakfast table with my family. Drank coffee and ate thin slices of toast with cheese.

I'm going to Ostend, I said
Ok, they said

In Ostend there was relief in the weather. Fresh air from the sea smacked me across the face and stung the insides of my nostrils. On the beach I threw off my clothes and, again, stared down at my pale, naked body. A fraction less pale, perhaps, since those eight minutes on a sunbed in Denmark Hill. I moved towards the water, avoiding the jellyfish - shivering, translucent - dispersed along the shoreline. I met the yellowed sea foam with my feet, waded in deeper still, felt the sharp break against my thighs, further in, cold on my wrists, cold on my chest, cold on my cheeks as I propelled myself through ochre waters. Submerged now. Satisfying tug through the hair. My ex used to say I was deliberately controversial, but the North Sea has always been my favourite. Childhood memories of strong tides, storms whipping up sand from the sea bed, stretches of wild dunes, the winds manipulating their unstable architecture, the low skies, with charged, grey clouds that rolled over turbulent water. Permeke's sea.

The sea was calm today, though. I allowed my body to float on its surface for twenty minutes or more, the sun stinging my face. Dragged myself out eventually, then lay supine on the sand. Later, I paced the beach, rummaged for shells and found one that curled in on itself. Tucked it between my lip and gum, letting it rest on top of my left canine. Took a picture of myself. Sent it to Aurea.

Where are you! She said
V last min, in belgium, strange holiday choice, I said

The afternoon came and I grew tired. I bought fried fish from a street vendor and pushed hot pieces of oily flesh into my mouth. Seagulls swarmed my head and hands, greedy for it. Decided to abandon the fish in the end. More trains.

– Sophie Ruigrok