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INTRODUCTION

BY DON GEORGE

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This book represents two milestones for me: it's the 10th literary anthology I've edited for Lonely Planet, and its publication marks my 40th year as a travel writer and editor. Contemplating these connected milestones as I complete this collection, I've realized that they share a fundamental truth: every LP anthology is a new journey, and just as with all my worldly journeys, each of these word-journeys teaches me something new and precious about the planet too.

To begin this year's literary journey, I reached out to a wide range of celebrated essayists, novelists, mystery writers, journalists, and travel writers, asking if they would like to write about a travel experience that had exerted a particularly profound and lasting influence on their lives. Despite daunting deadlines and demanding schedules, two dozen of these responded with impassioned tales. Humbled and heartened by their enthusiastic response, I posted a call for submissions online, inviting writers around the world to submit tales of travels that had in some way changed their lives. I received hundreds of stories, many of them exceptionally eloquent and compelling.

From these rich pieces I composed the collection you hold in your hands: 34 stories representing a world-spanning spectrum of themes, styles and settings.

Some of these stories present youthful adventures that bestowed

indelible lessons. On her first trip to the US, Jan Morris discovers the quintessence of America in a moment of Wisconsin wonder. Inspired by a cologne commercial, teenager Elizabeth George sojourns in Swinging London on a school program – and falls under the spell of a subject and setting that will become the focus of her life's work. In his mid-twenties, Alexander McCall Smith tastes triumph and tragedy on an odyssey around a momentarily idyllic Ireland, and on her first trip overseas, Blane Bachelor courts disaster by turning an eight-hour airport layover into an innocent exploration of downtown Bangkok.

In some of these stories, travel sows the seeds of love, as it does for Ann Patchett when she misses a flight to Vienna, then puts her ticket to much better use one year later, and for Francine Prose in Oaxaca, where the theft of her family's passports and plane tickets delivers an unexpected, life-threatening reward. TC Boyle settles uneasily into an isolated Irish farmhouse for three and a half months, and unexpectedly makes lifelong friends. And Shannon Leone Fowler experiences love and loss of the most profound kind, as she and her boyfriend explore the far reaches of China – and each other.

Sometimes our travels confer unexpected connections. Suzanne Joinson is enchanted by the jasmine-scented mysteries and marvels of Damascus, Porochista Khakpour finds an unfamiliar sense of belonging on her first visit to Indonesia, Natalie Baszile follows her heart into the home of an unconventional Louisiana family, and James Michael Dorsey communes with his ancestors – and plays a crucial, unwitting role – on a hunting expedition with a Stone Age tribe in Tanzania.

Sometimes we are at a turning point in our lives when we travel, and our journey becomes both compass and balm: Mridu Khullar Relph conjures the resolve to overcome intimidation in Ghana, Carissa Kasper finds herself via sickness and salt flats in Bolivia, Maggie Downs unloads her grief with strangers-become-family in Egypt, and Bridget Crocker navigates uncharted waters – literally and emotionally – on a remote river in India.

And sometimes travel bestows endlessly rippling life-lessons, as it does for Jeff Greenwald tracking the divergent trails of love from

Greece to Nepal to California; Pico Iyer trying to foresee the future in Kathmandu and Kyoto; and Tahir Shah following the teachings of a seed into the mountains of Morocco.

These are just some of the stories herein. All of the pieces in this extraordinary collection are equally moving and inspiring tales of life-changing adventures. I have felt honored and privileged to edit them, and I want to thank all the authors for their evocative, poignant and courageous contributions.

These days I spend much of my time teaching and speaking around the world, and one question I'm invariably asked is: what is the point of travel writing? I usually answer that, for me, travel writing is an attempt to record and share my experiences away from home – to evoke the cultures, landscapes, and people that I've encountered, and to share the challenges and revelations these encounters have bestowed.

But now, as I contemplate this collection of tales, I realize that even more fundamentally, the point of travel writing is simply to make sense of the world – the world outside and the world inside, and the sacred place where they intersect. Travel writing is an attempt to impose order and meaning on the chaos of experience, and in this, it taps deeply into the rich and ancient vein of human storytelling.

In this sense, the tales in this book hearken back to travel writing's distant roots, but they also have great contemporary significance, for as the landscape of publishing has transformed over the past few years, some critics have predicted the death of travel writing, opining that vividly written and deeply reflected accounts would give way to superficial blog posts and insipid prose-selfies. As the stories collected here resonantly attest, great travel writing – transporting travel storytelling – is alive and well in 2016.

Another heartening gift I take from this collection is the illustration of how important travel is to our planet. It's important to each of us as individuals. And it's important to us collectively too.

Forty years ago, on a balmy spring night in Athens, I sat in the moonlight reflecting on the first of my own life-changing travel experiences: I had spent the year after college living in Paris and Athens, and traveling to Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Turkey, and Egypt; in a month I would leave for Kenya and Tanzania. I took out the tattered, wine-spattered journal that had accompanied me throughout these adventures and wrote, ‘These travels have expanded and enriched my world view more than I can comprehend. The more I travel, the more I see, the bigger the world becomes. And the more cultures and peoples I encounter, the more I am awed and fascinated by the incredibly intricate and beautiful tapestry of humanity that covers this small globe.’

I didn’t know then that I would become a travel writer, and that I would spend the next four decades of my life wandering the world and trying to make sense of my adventures. But now, looking back on that wide-eyed young man, I can see that the life-map I would follow was already being drawn.

Recently I sat in the California moonlight writing the introduction to an anthology of my own travel writing from the past 40 years. Reflecting on the meaning of travel for me, I wrote, ‘As I have learned over and over, travel teaches us about the vast and varied differences that enrich the global mosaic, in landscape, creation, custom, and belief, and about the importance of each and every piece in that mosaic. Travel teaches us to embrace our vulnerability and to have faith that whatever energy we put into the world will come back to us a hundredfold. Travel teaches us to approach unfamiliar cultures and peoples with curiosity and respect, and to realize that the great majority of people around the world, whatever their differences in background and belief, care for their fellow human beings. And ultimately, travel teaches us about love. It teaches us that the very best we can do with our lives is to embrace the peoples, places, and cultures we meet with all our mind, heart, and soul, to live as fully as possible in every moment, every day. And it teaches us that this embrace is simultaneously a way of becoming whole and letting go.’

Reading these words now, I’m struck by how deeply these same themes weave through the stories in this anthology. The tales presented here show how, at its best, travel is a profoundly surprising experience, one that opens our eyes, minds, and hearts to the wonders of the world. They show how travel tests us and teaches us – that we are not alone, that we are resilient, that we can overcome the greatest challenges and forge paths through even the most daunting mountains and deserts, literal and metaphorical. And they show us that the way to find and forge these paths – and to complete the connections they make possible – is by pouring our love into the world.

That’s the final, most precious lesson this collection affirms for me: if we follow the compass of the heart, we will always find our way.

Thank you for taking this book into your life. As you travel through these pages, may your mind be widened, your spirit enlivened, and your own path illuminated by these worldly word-journeys.

LONG DISTANCE

BY TORRE DEROCHE

(Names have been changed.)

It's a well-known fact that teenagers can't see long distance. They can only see as far as the back corner of a sports oval, where the cool kids are smoking cigarettes and making out with mouths bracketed by zits. Beyond that point, the world obscures into vague, peripheral irrelevance. Whateverland. It therefore seemed odd that my high school would arrange for a busload of fifteen-year-olds to travel to the very centre of irrelevance, a mindboggling 2380 kilometres from our normal seeing range and into the blank void of the Australian outback.

What do you pack for a journey into barren nothingness? Well, in my case, everything I could stuff into a duffle bag only marginally smaller than a Mini Cooper, including most of my wardrobe, a pair of black Dr Marten boots for hiking, John Lennon sunglasses, a disposable camera, a Walkman and mixtapes, a journal with a lock and key, my favourite stuffed toy, my favourite padded bra, zit cream and a huge feather comforter patterned with lions and tigers (to keep the monsters out at night).

We were headed towards the country's red centre, to the world's largest monolith, Uluru, but of course we didn't care about enormous rocks or monumental deserts or the fact that, in the outback, you can see a zillion burning suns on the ceiling of night, a shooting star a

second. We cared only about the fact that, for three delicious weeks, our days would be spent pressed up against forty other teens in the small and breathy space of a moving vehicle – without parental supervision.

We knew we'd left the suburbs when we saw a truck fly past with a bloodied kangaroo tangled in its bumper, little paws angled in haphazard directions, guts woven through the steel grill like a macabre cross-stitch. 'Ewwwww!' everyone on the bus chorused in disgusted delight. The outback roadside was littered with a hodgepodge of dead wildlife, each with its own halo of blowflies. You don't often see death in the suburbs, and seeing so many lifeless mammals was like witnessing something illicit. But what was going on outside the windows was not nearly as exciting as what was going on inside the bus...

In the seat next to mine, there was Marike: an exceptional artist, the coolest girl in school, and as stylish as she was self-assured. I was in love with her, platonically speaking, though I wasn't sure if I wanted to be friends with her so much as drape myself in her like a wolf-skin coat so I could navigate the world inside that much chutzpah. She had a mean streak in her too, but we were best friends, so I was never the target of her bite. I was safe next to this big, bad, beautiful wolf – protected, even.

Then there was Kurt. He was new to our school and darkly mysterious, like Christian Slater in *Heathers*, and so, of course, when he spoke to me, each and every hair on my body stood to attention. When he accidentally brushed past me one time, electric currents ran through my bones. Strategising ways to sit closer to him consumed most of my mental energies.

There was Carolina, who'd been my friend since we were wide-eyed and clear-skinned. She taught me how to shoplift and carve a bong from an apple at a time when I was still memorising all the lyrics to Disney songs. She was way cooler than me, luminous and magnetic,