The Furthest Distances I've Travelled

SUMMARY

The speaker says that, like a lot of people, the first time they hefted a heavy backpack and felt their backbone bending beneath it the way a meridian bends across the earth's curvature, they were struck by how absolutely right it seemed. Whether they were visiting a common tourist destination, navigating hidden mountain paths, going from Poland to Croatia, or sitting in the cold white rooms of distant airports, it was obvious as a voice over a loudspeaker that constant anonymous travel was the speaker's destiny.

The speaker isn't sure whether it was the warnings about antimalarial drugs—whose possible side include temporary insanity and going bald—that led them, *not* to a bank to send money with their rudimentary Lithuanian, but down to the local post office to deposit a little cash or an unemployment check. And they can't quite figure out why now, if they happen to find themselves shoving underwear into a bag, it's less likely that they're taking a bus across Wisconsin and more likely that they're catching up on laundry.

Still, when they tidy up their home and find unfamiliar underwear, movie tickets, some passing words jotted on a post-it note, or a little pressed flower hidden away in a drawer, they know that these things are their mementoes. From these fragments of previous relationships—such as this ragged sports sock—they know that the longest journeys they've been on have been those between themselves and the people they've had relationships with. The little odds and ends are their souvenirs from short vacations in other people's lives.

THEMES

THE VALUE AND DIFFICULTY OF RELATIONSHIPS

In "The Furthest Distances I've Traveled," the speaker compares the adventurous travels of their younger days to the even more daring distances they've traversed "between people." Though the poem's speaker has lived an adventurous life, backpacking all over the world, they've since discovered that such journeys aren't the most difficult ones. Relationships, in this poem, are their own kind of journey: an effort to cross the gap between one person and another can be an even greater adventure than a trek across the wilderness.

Now that the speaker no longer backpacks to faraway places, their life sometimes seems a little bit muted to them. But sometimes, when they're tidying up their house and throwing things away, they find all sorts of reminders of a different kind of excitement: past relationships. An "alien" pair of underwear, old movie tickets, a "tiny stowaway / pressed flower" and a "throwaway / comment—on a post–it" are as much "souvenirs" as anything the speaker picked up on their travels. Such "crushed valentines," the speaker implies, bring up memories of lost loves.

Forming a relationship makes the speaker feel as if they're "holidaying briefly" in someone else's life, visiting a foreign place and trying to get to know it. In this, relationships are a lot like travel. The speaker has gone to great metaphorical "distances" to get to know and care about other people. Although the speaker only knew their past lovers for a time, it's clear that these people had a lasting effect on their life, just as their travels did.

The speaker thus feels that "the furthest distances [they've] travelled" aren't between places, but between people. They may not be trekking "between Krakow / and Zagreb" or taking anti-malarial drugs these days, but their relationships have provided similar thrills and challenges. While the "anony / mity" of travel excited them in their youth, it is the attempt to know and be known that makes their life now challenging and rewarding. A successful relationship, the poem hints, is even harder to navigate than a "sherpa pass"!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

SEEKING ADVENTURE VS. SETTLING DOWN

In "The Furthest Distances I've Traveled," the speaker recalls the intense excitement they experienced the first time they picked up a backpack and began traveling the world. They remember the thrill of getting from place to place, whether it was a direct "path" or a more obscure one; adventure, they say, felt like their "destiny." But nowadays, the speaker admits, they are more likely to be catching up on household chores than jumping on a bus. Though they have left the more active adventures of their youth behind, growing up and settling down has allowed them to appreciate the quieter adventures of everyday life and relationships.

The speaker remembers a time when the thrill of globetrotting was the most important part of their life. The first time they put on a backpack, the speaker says, they "thought: Yes. This is how / to live." They got a sense of purpose—even "destiny"—from moving from place to place, regardless of whether they stayed "On the beaten track" or trekked to somewhere more remote.

Their excitement, they recall, came "clear as over a tannoy" (or loudspeaker), suggesting that they felt completely certain this was the way they were meant to live their life.

Yet somewhere along the way, the speaker admits, their life became more rooted and ordinary. Looking around them, the speaker marvels at how different their daily life is now. Rather than wiring money from a Western Union in Lithuania, they find themselves running errands at an ordinary post office close to home. (Judging by the vocabulary—"giro," "pants"—home for the speaker is probably in the UK or Ireland). And they're more likely "to be doing some overdue laundry" than "catching a greyhound." It's clear their life has become much more settled since their traveling days.

Still, growing up and settling down doesn't mean the speaker has lost their sense of adventure. The speaker reflects on the "souvenirs" they find while tidying up: "cinema stubs" and a "pressed flower amid bottom drawers" remind them of "crushed valentines," words that suggest the speaker has had a busy romantic life. These little mementos of relationships suggest that a rooted life can offer its own thrills. Even if one doesn't go on wild travels, relationships continue to make life exciting. In this way, the poem suggests that one doesn't have to go to the ends of the earth to have an adventurous life. An ordinary, settled life offers its share of adventure.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Like many folk, ...
... to live.

As the poem begins, the speaker recalls the first time they shouldered a traveler's backpack. Their "spine / curved" beneath it, they say, like "a meridian"—an imaginary longitudinal line that passes over the earth's surface and connects its poles. This simile suggests that, right from the start, the speaker felt this backpack opened up the whole world to them. Their very body mirrored the shape of the globe they'd soon travel.

Upon feeling the weight of the backpack—and everything it signified—the speaker says:

> I thought: Yes. This is how
> to live. [...]

In other words, under the weight of their backpack, the speaker immediately felt that they had found their life's purpose: to travel all over the world. This will be a poem about a call to adventure—and about what happens after that adventure ends.

The speaker will tell their tale in eight quatrains (four-line stanzas) of free verse. The lack of meter here, alongside a rough rhyme scheme of couplets (often in the loosest slant rhyme—for instance, "spine" and "meridian" share only that /n/ consonance), will make the speaker's voice feel colloquial and approachable, as if they're telling the reader a story over a drink.

LINES 6-8

On the beaten ...
... of scattered airports;

After their big revelation about travel as the right way to live life, the speaker recalls, they set off on all sorts of adventures. Whether "on the beaten track" (that is, in bustling, familiar tourist destinations like Paris or Venice), on a wild "sherpa pass" (a dangerous mountain trail), or between "Krakow" (in Poland) and "Zagreb" (in Croatia), the speaker saw a lot of the world. These lines suggest the speaker wasn't fussy: all kinds of travel interested them, from the relaxing to the outright dangerous. They wanted to experience as much as possible.

Note the push and pull between enjambment and caesura in this stanza. Enjambment pushes the reader forward *across* lines, building momentum and evoking the speaker's enthusiasm and excitement, like so:

> On the beaten track, the sherpa pass, between
> Krakow
> and Zagreb, or the Siberian white
> cells of scattered airports;

These lines run into each other as swiftly as the speaker traveled.

At the same time, caesura slows the reader down *within* lines, encouraging them to pause and pay attention to certain words and phrases. Consider what happened a moment ago in lines 5-6, for instance:

> I thought: || Yes. || This is how
> to live. [...]

The colon after "thought" and the period after "Yes" slow the reader down dramatically, highlighting the significance of this moment in which the speaker discovers their love of backpacking. Standing all alone, that "Yes" suggests a bold embrace of a new life philosophy.

The speaker's travels weren't always easy, though. In lines 7-8, in which the speaker is stuck in remote airports, /s/ alliteration and more general sibilance evoke a certain loneliness:

> [...] or the Siberian white
> cells of scattered airports;

These /s/ sounds highlight the quiet of these far-flung airports, which are snowy-white and blank (and perhaps as prison-like as a Siberian gulag!). Both the hushed sounds and the startling metaphor of these "Siberian white / cells" suggests that there's a coldness to spending so much time in airports; travelers can feel very far away from ordinary life.

LINES 9-12

it came clear ...
... kind of destiny.

Despite the challenges of a life lived in constant transit, though, the speaker says that "it came clear as over a tannoy" (a loudspeaker or public announcement system) that "restlessness" and "anony / mity" were a "kind of destiny." This simile evokes the crackle of an airport loudspeaker in one of those "scattered airports," as if a call from an airline desk were the voice of Fate, telling the speaker that they were destined for constant anonymous travel. The strong /c/ alliteration in "came clear" emphasizes the crisp certainty of this realization.

Notice the extreme enjambment in lines 10-11:

> that in restlessness, in anony
> mity:

This striking split in the middle of a word suggests that anonymity was a big and important part of the speaker's adventures: they never really got to know anyone or be known because they were too busy moving around from place to place. Perhaps the mid-word break also suggests that there's something a little bit broken about anonymity itself. Though the speaker loved their anonymity, perhaps it also cut them off from important things: people they loved, parts of their identity.

Splitting "anonymity" into two also keeps the poem's odd rhyme scheme intact, at least on a visual level. "Tannoy" and "anony" *look* like they should rhyme, as do "mity" and "destiny." (Out loud this move is more subtle than it looks—one doesn't really *hear* the enjambment of "anonymity," so the reader ends up hearing something like a slant triple rhyme between "tannoy," "anonymity," and "destiny").

LINES 13-18

So whether it ...
... or a giro;

Now, the speaker begins to describe a shift in their life. They're not exactly sure what led them to this point, but it might have had something to do with "the scare stories about Larium":

- Larium is a drug used to treat malaria, a deadly disease caused by mosquito bites. Malaria is most common in hot, tropical climates south of the equator, so it seems the speaker was either visiting or planning on visiting a country where they might have had to take this antimalarial drug.
- Larium's unfortunate side effects include everything from "delirium" (a sudden spell of delusion or hallucinations) to "baldness."

This allusion to Larium suggests that the speaker stopped feeling quite so fearless about their travels. Perhaps this is just an example of the kind of things they started paying attention to around this time. In other words, it might not be that they stopped traveling because they were scared about Larium in particular, but that they started weighing the costs and difficulties of their life on the road a little differently.

The poem is purposely vague about the speaker's change in perspective; the speaker just isn't sure what happened. In any case, the speaker says that this change didn't lead them "to a Western Union / wiring money with six words of Lithuanian" (a situation they must have been in before), but to:

> [...] this post office with a handful of bills
> or a giro; [...]

In other words, the speaker is firmly back home now, somewhere in the UK or Ireland. Running errands at the post office, depositing a little cash or an unemployment check into their bank account, they're living a much more ordinary, settled life than they once did.

LINES 18-22

and why, if ...
... really beyond me.

The speaker's life, it turns out, has changed an awful lot. These days, if they're "stuffing smalls / hastily into a holdall" (that is, cramming underwear into a bag), it's "less likely" that they're "catching a greyhound from Madison to Milwaukee" and more likely that they're "doing some overdue laundry." These lines evoke not just the speaker's current harried, humdrum life, but the excitement of the past, when a younger self used to just jam clothes into a bag and take off.

In other words, their life has changed pretty dramatically. The carefree, restless days of their youth are over; now they're living a much more ordinary life. How this came to be "is really beyond [them]"—that is, they're surprised and kind of confused about how they ended up living this life. Settling down, these lines suggest, can really creep up on a person.

The strong enjambments here evoke the speaker's surprise:

> [...] and why, if I'm stuffing smalls
> hastily into a holdall, I am less likely
> to be catching a greyhound from Madison to
> Milwaukee
> than to be doing some overdue laundry
> is really beyond me.

The speed and momentum of this passage—including an enjambment that leaps right over a stanza break—suggests that the speaker's life got away from them: they settled down without quite realizing they were doing it. Sometimes, the speaker ruefully reflects, life just *happens*, and before you know it, you've got a fixed address and a long list of chores.

LINES 23-28

However, ...
... are my souvenirs

Though their life is practically unrecognizable these days, the speaker implies that their adventures haven't come to an end. They've just changed shape.

As the speaker is doing one of many "routine evictions" (probably cleaning up their home and throwing out old things, though perhaps they've also been literally evicted a few times!), they find all kinds of stray objects that speak to what they've been up to since they stopped traveling. Among their finds are "alien pants" (that is, someone else's underwear), movie tickets, stray notes written "on a post-it," and a little dried "flower amid bottom drawers." The speaker says that this random assortment of objects—all of which suggest past relationships—are their "souvenirs" now. In place of globetrotting, they now have the rewards and troubles that come with navigating relationships.

Notice that most of the lines here are still enjambed:

> when, during routine evictions, I discover
> alien pants, cinema stubs, the throwaway
> comment—on a post-it—or a tiny stowaway
> pressed flower amid bottom drawers,

The pace thus still feels fast, creating the sense that the speaker's love life, like their travel life, has involved a lot of swift movement from place to place. This suggests that, although the speaker is no longer constantly on the road, they are dealing with the uncertainty and continual change that goes along with getting to know other people.

LINES 29-32

and, from these ...
... in their lives.

The speaker compares their keepsakes to "crushed valentines," suggesting that what all these mementos have in common is that they signify relationships that have *ended*. The poem thus implies that relationships aren't exactly easy. Similarly, the image of the "unravelled / sports sock," another remnant of a past relationship, hints at how easily things can come undone.

The speaker comes to understand that although they've crisscrossed the globe in their physical travels, ultimately "the furthest distances [they've] travelled / have been those between people." In other words, relationships are even more challenging—and thus, the poem implies, potentially more rewarding—than the longest, most arduous treks. The poem's "distances," then, are a metaphor for the lengths people go to achieve intimacy. The speaker no longer feels anonymity is their destiny; instead, they long to find connection, to know and be known by others.

Listen to the strong caesura toward the end of line 31:

> have been those between people. And what survives

The caesura brings the reader to a complete stop within the line, directing attention to the word "people"—the subject that this poem is, at its heart, most interested in.

The poem ends with the speaker acknowledging the importance of "what survives / of holidaying briefly in [other people's] lives." That is, just as they gathered memories and souvenirs from traveling to different places, the speaker finds that they are left with valuable memories from each relationship they've embarked on. Even if the relationships don't last, the speaker understands the experiences they've had getting to know other people to be as meaningful as their travels were. Other people, this poem suggests, are like other countries: exciting, remote, challenging, and worth getting to know.

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The poem's similes wittily connect the speaker's outer experiences to their inner ones.

For instance, consider this moment from the speaker's earliest traveling days:

> Like many folk, when I first saddled a rucksack,
> feeling its weight on my back—
> the way my spine
> curved under it like a meridian—

The simile compares the bend of the speaker's back beneath their backpack to the imaginary longitudinal line that crosses over the earth's surface, connecting its poles. Besides painting a funny picture of the speaker hunching forward under a heavy bag, this simile suggests that the speaker felt an exciting sense of destiny as they shouldered that rucksack. Feeling that meridian curve in their spine, the speaker also knows in their bones that they'll travel all over the globe, from pole to pole.

In line 9, meanwhile, the speaker hears "some kind of destiny" calling to them as if "over a tannoy," a loudspeaker. Arriving right after the speaker's image of "scattered airports," this simile evokes the kind of crackly loudspeaker announcement

one might hear in an airport—as if an airline desk were calling the speaker to their nomadic fate.

In both of these similes, the speaker uses the physical realities of travel to evoke the feelings and beliefs their adventures conjured up for them.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "my spine / curved under it like a meridian—"
- **Line 9:** "it came clear as over a tannoy"

ENJAMBMENT

The momentum of frequent enjambments evokes the frenzied travel of the speaker's backpacking days.

For instance, listen to the rush of these lines in the second stanza:

> I thought: Yes. This is how
> to live. On the beaten track, the sherpa pass,
> between Krakow
> and Zagreb, or the Siberian white
> cells of scattered airports;

For the first few lines here, the speaker rushes from place to place as seamlessly as the lines run into each other. At the end of the stanza, all that movement skids to a halt: the last line hits an end-stop after "airports," highlighting the fact that travel has its slow, lonely, quiet episodes as well as its breathless movement.

Enjambments in lines 9-11 further emphasize the speaker's lonely backpacking adventures:

> it came clear as over a tannoy
> that in restlessness, in anony
> mity:
> was some kind of destiny.

The extreme enjambment that divides "anonymity" across two lines draws a lot of attention to this key word. Perhaps this enjambment even suggests that to be anonymous is to be in some sense *split*, separated from the people who know you and thus from part of your own identity.

The poem often uses enjambments across stanzas, as well. Take a look at lines 24-27, for instance:

> when, during routine evictions, I discover
> alien pants, cinema stubs, the throwaway
> comment—on a post-it—or a tiny stowaway

Breaking the sentence after "discover," the speaker gets the opportunity to start a new stanza with a joke: the "alien pants," mysterious underwear, provide a funny introduction to their list of relationship mementoes.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "spine / curved"
- **Lines 5-6:** "how / to"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Krakow / and"
- **Lines 7-8:** "white / cells"
- **Lines 10-11:** "anony / mity"
- **Lines 14-15:** "delirium / and"
- **Lines 17-18:** "bills / or"
- **Lines 18-19:** "smalls / hastily"
- **Lines 19-20:** "likely / to"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Milwaukee / than"
- **Lines 21-22:** "laundry / is"
- **Lines 24-25:** "discover / alien"
- **Lines 25-26:** "throwaway / comment"
- **Lines 26-27:** "stowaway / pressed"
- **Lines 29-30:** "unravelled / sports"
- **Lines 30-31:** "travelled / have"
- **Lines 31-32:** "survives / of"

CAESURA

While enjambment tugs the reader forward, the poem's caesurae slow the reader down, adding dramatic pauses within lines.

Listen to the many breaks in lines 5-6, for instance:

> I thought: || Yes. || This is how
> to live. || On the beaten track, || the sherpa pass, ||
> between Krakow

Here, an abundance of caesura frames the moment when the speaker realizes they're exactly where they want to be, doing exactly what they want to be doing. That "Yes" in line 5 stands all alone, taking on special weight: this is the speaker saying "Yes" to a whole philosophy of life.

The commas in line 6 are less emphatic. Rather than pulling the reader to a stop, they create a pleasing rhythm: the speaker moves from one destination to the next, never staying for very long, and the little pauses the commas create evoke the speaker's brief pauses in one town or another.

Another important caesura appears in the second-to-last line of the poem:

> have been those between people. || And what
> survives

The caesura here creates a momentum of suspense before the poem's final line, giving special weight to the closing idea that relationships, like travels, leave significant memories in their

wake. This caesura also stresses the word "people"—who, ultimately, are the speaker's deepest interest.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "folk, when"
- **Line 5:** "thought: Yes. This"
- **Line 6:** "track, the," "pass, between"
- **Line 7:** "Zagreb, or"
- **Line 10:** "restlessness, in"
- **Line 15:** "baldness—that," "me, not"
- **Line 18:** "giro; and," "why, if"
- **Line 19:** "holdall, I"
- **Line 24:** "when, during," "evictions, I"
- **Line 25:** "pants, cinema stubs, the"
- **Line 26:** "comment—on," "post-it—or"
- **Line 29:** "and, from," "valentines, this"
- **Line 30:** "sock, that"
- **Line 31:** "people. And"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives the poem rhythm, music, and emphasis.

In the first two lines, for instance, /f/ alliteration evokes the speaker's enthusiasm as they discover their love for traveling:

> Like many folk, when first I saddled a rucksack,
> feeling its weight on my back—

The firm, repeated /f/ sound here reflects the speaker's immediate conviction that a traveler's life was the life for them.

In lines 7-8, meanwhile /s/ alliteration (and more general sibilance) evokes the sterile, desolate quiet of remote airports:

> and Zagreb, or the Siberian white
> cells of scattered airports;

All those /s/ and /z/ sounds might equally evoke wind blowing over a Siberian tundra and the hush of a lonely airport late at night.

Other moments of alliteration just plain sound nice, giving the poem a pleasing, cheery bounce. Listen to what happens in lines 18-21, for example:

> [...] if I'm stuffing smalls
> hastily into a holdall, I am less likely
> to be catching a greyhound from Madison to Milwaukee
> than to be doing some overdue laundry

All the paired sounds here make the speaker's voice sound light and funny, suggesting that they have a rueful sense of humor about their new, more sedate life as an adult.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "folk," "first"
- **Line 2:** "feeling"
- **Line 6:** "beaten," "between"
- **Line 7:** "Siberian"
- **Line 8:** "cells," "scattered"
- **Line 9:** "came clear"
- **Line 13:** "scare stories"
- **Line 15:** "Western"
- **Line 16:** "wiring," "words"
- **Line 19:** "hastily," "holdall," "less likely"
- **Line 20:** "Madison," "Milwaukee"
- **Line 21:** "laundry"
- **Line 24:** "during," "discover"
- **Line 30:** "sports sock"

ALLUSION

The speaker's allusions suggest that they're an experienced world traveler, familiar with all the inconveniences and thrills of trotting the globe.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker thinks back to:

> [...] the scare stories about Larium
> —the threats of delirium
> and baldness—[...]

"Larium" is a drug used to treat malaria, suggesting that the speaker traveled (or considered traveling) to a place where malarial outbreaks were common: the countries south of the equator, where the mosquitoes that carry malaria thrive. The speaker's worries about "delirium / and baldness" refer to the fact that Larium has severe (and severely unpleasant) side effects. The drug was being marketed across the globe in the early 90s, but by 1994 doctors were seeing large numbers of people suffering from serious symptoms (including delirium, temporary insanity) after taking the drug. This might suggest the speaker was traveling at around this time—and perhaps that some of the dangers of their travels began to sink in then, too.

Quieter allusions also tell readers something about the speaker's life at home. When they describe going to the "post office with a handful of bills / or a giro," for instance, they reveal that they're living in the UK or Ireland, where people do their banking at the post office (including depositing "giros," unemployment checks, there). The detail of that small "handful of bills," alongside the giro, suggests that the speaker isn't necessarily living high on the hog these days.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "the scare stories about / Larium / —the

threats of delirium / and baldness"
- **Lines 17-18:** "to this post office with a handful of bills / or a giro"

VOCABULARY

Saddled (Line 1) - Put on. The word suggests that the rucksack has to be swung heavily over the speaker's shoulders as a saddle is swung over a horse's back.

Rucksack (Line 1) - A backpack.

Meridian (Lines 3-4) - An imagined circle passing over the earth's surface and connecting its poles.

The beaten track (Line 6) - Familiar places; places lots of people visit.

The sherpa pass (Line 6) - *Sherpa* are a mountain-dwelling people in the Himalayas known for their mountaineering skills. A *sherpa pass* thus suggests a path through mountains that it would take considerable know-how to navigate.

Zagreb (Lines 6-7) - The capital of Croatia.

Krakow (Lines 6-7) - A city in the south of Poland.

Siberian (Lines 7-8) - Relating to Siberia, a massive Russian province spanning the bulk of Northern Asia. The speaker here uses the word to suggest that airports can be as blank and white as the snowy Siberian tundra. Perhaps the "white cells" here also allude to the fact that Siberia is the home to infamous Russian political prisons.

Tannoy (Line 9) - A loudspeaker or public announcement system.

Larium (Lines 13-13) - A drug used to treat malaria. As the speaker points out, it's known for its scary side effects.

Delirium (Lines 14-15) - Sudden confusion, disorientation, hallucinations, and/or memory loss.

Western Union (Lines 15-16) - An American banking institution that provides international money transfers.

Wiring (Line 16) - Transferring electronically.

Lithuanian (Line 16) - The official language of Lithuania.

Giro (Lines 17-18) - An unemployment check.

Holdall (Lines 18-19) - A large, sturdy bag.

Smalls (Lines 18-19) - Underwear.

Greyhound (Line 20) - An American long-haul bus service.

Milwaukee (Line 20) - The most populous city in Wisconsin.

Madison (Line 20) - The capital of Wisconsin.

Evictions (Line 24) - The speaker might be using the word "evictions" here to suggest tidying up, "evicting" old trash from pockets and drawers. They might also mean they literally get evicted periodically and need to pack up all their stuff.

Pants (Lines 24-25) - Underwear.

Stowaway (Lines 26-27) - A *stowaway* is someone who hides in a ship or airplane in order to obtain free passage or escape being seen. Using the word here, the speaker implies that the flower has escaped their notice, hiding away in their drawers.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Furthest Distances I've Travelled" is written in free verse, without a regular meter. However, it does use a roughly regular shape: its 32 lines are broken into eight quatrains (four-line stanzas). Though the consistent stanza length adds some structure and predictability to the poem, individual lines vary considerably. The shortest is only half a word long!

This variety, alongside lots of unexpected enjambments, mirrors the novelty and strangeness of the speaker's travels, upon which the speaker saw everything from the busy streets of "Krakow / and Zagreb" to a remote "sherpa pass." The surprises in the poem's shape also evoke the surprises in the speaker's life, up to and including the discovery that the "furthest distances" might be between one person and another, not between hemispheres.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a regular meter. The *lack* of meter—along with the use of colloquial vocabulary like "pants" and "holidaying"—means the poem sounds as footloose as the speaker was in their younger days. It also makes the speaker's voice feel casual and conversational, as if they were just telling an anecdote to a friend.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses a straightforward rhyme scheme of couplets, like this:

AABB

Notice, however, that many of the poem's rhymes are slant, and often very faint: "spine" and "meridian" in the first stanza, for example, only share /n/ consonance, and "white" and "airports" in the second stanza share even more tenuous /t/ consonance. These less-than-perfect rhymes make the poem's musicality more subtle, especially since many lines are enjambed, discouraging the reader from overemphasizing the last words of lines and giving the poem a relaxed, conversational tone.

In the third stanza, the poet practically bends over backward to keep the rhyme scheme intact:

> it came clear as over a tannoy
> that in restlessness, in anony

mity:
was some kind of destiny.

Here, the poet enjambs a line in the middle of a word—"anonymity"—in part so that the rhyme scheme doesn't get disrupted! This rhyme really only works on a visual level, though; reading the poem aloud, one will just hear three slant rhymes in "tannoy," "anonymity," and "destiny."

SPEAKER

The speaker is a one-time world traveler. The poem doesn't tell readers much about this person's identity or background, but their vocabulary ("rucksack," "giro," "pants" as in underwear) suggests they're from the UK or Ireland. (Flynn herself is from Northern Ireland.)

In their youth, the speaker was most excited by the thrill of "anony / mity"—that is, being unknown, a stranger in a strange land. They clearly loved an adventure and weren't scared to look for it either on or off "the beaten path."

Now that they're older, though, the speaker has settled down a bit. They're no longer hopping on buses and sitting in airports. Instead, they're at home, tidying up and recalling past relationships. The many keepsakes they unearth as they dig through "bottom drawers" suggest that, although they're no longer as physically daring as they used to be, they still find plenty of journeys to go on. Now, however, these journeys are "between people" rather than countries or continents.

SETTING

Though they once traveled the world, the poem's speaker is now firmly planted at home. The poem doesn't say where that home is, exactly, but judging by the speaker's vocabulary, readers can guess it's probably somewhere in the UK or Ireland. Here, they spend their time doing "overdue laundry," running errands, and tidying up their home, sorting through ephemera of past relationships—in short, living a fairly humdrum and ordinary life.

The poem also evokes the speaker's more adventurous past. The speaker recalls places as far-flung as Poland, Croatia, Lithuania, and Wisconsin. And their mention of the dangerous side effects of "Larium," an anti-malarial drug, suggests that they at least considered traveled further afield to the countries in the southern hemisphere where malaria is prevalent.

The poem's larger point about place is that physical travel is only one way to cross great distances. Crossing the gap "between people" is its own kind of mighty journey.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Leontia Flynn was born in County Down in Northern Ireland in 1974. Growing up, she was drawn to poems in school anthologies and began writing her own poems at the age of 14. At 16 her class studied Philip Larkin and he became one of her major influences.

Flynn earned an MA at Edinburgh University and then completed a Ph.D. on the poetry of Northern Irish poet Medbh McGuckian at Queen's University Belfast. Her other influences include Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Paul Muldoon as well as Shakespeare and the Roman poet Catullus.

She published "The Furthest Distances I've Travelled" in her first collection, *These Days*, in 2004. This debut received much praise from critics and earned her the Forward Prize for best first collection. Fellow Northern Irish poet Colette Bryce wrote that *These Days* "is a landscape of shiftless youth, rented flats, bread-and-butter jobs and millennial angst." Thereafter, Flynn began working at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University Belfast. She has since published three other books of poetry.

Broadly speaking, "The Furthest Distances I've Travelled" can be seen as belonging to a tradition of poems in which traveling is used as a metaphor for other aspects of life. In Flynn's poem, the journey "between people"—that is, the attempt to form relationships—is ultimately what's significant. Other poems that portray metaphorical journeys include Emily Dickinson's "Our Journey Had Advanced," where the journey is one from life into death and eternity; "The Journey" by Mary Oliver, where the speaker goes through both an outer and inner journey in order to save their own life; and W.B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," where the journey represents a symbolic quest for spiritual meaning.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Furthest Distances I've Travelled" was published in 2004—the same year that Facebook was launched, al-Qaeda bombed trains in Madrid, and the biggest earthquake in 40 years struck southeast Asia. But the poem doesn't directly address historical events such as these. Instead, it looks at the world through the eyes of a globetrotting young backpacker. To this speaker, the world is a place full of potential adventures, a place to be seen. Their simple decision to throw on a backpack and hit the road reflects the increasing ease of 21st-century travel: if this poem had been written a mere century earlier, there would have been no "scattered airports" or anti-malarial "Larium" to smooth the speaker's path.

Backpacking as a style of travel began with the "hippie trail" of the 1960s and '70s, a route between western Europe and South Asia. In the decades since, it's boomed in popularity

among people in their late teens and early 20s. As the name suggests, backpackers travel with only what they can carry in a backpack. A low-cost form of travel, it typically involves taking trips longer than the standard week's vacation, staying in cheap accommodations like hostels or homestays, and using public transport to get between destinations.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Flynn reading her poem. (https://poetryarchive.org/poem/furthest-distances-ive-travelled/)
- Flynn's Critical Reception — Read a review of Flynn's first book. (https://www.poetsgraves.co.uk/Poetry%20Book%20Reviews/these_days.htm)
- An Interview with Flynn — Watch a 2018 video of Flynn talking about her work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkSc4-TGq84)
- A Brief Biography — Read an introduction to Flynn's work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/leontia-flynn)

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