

Stephen Robertson

Fragments of a life

We walked across England, once. If you follow the west-to-east coast-to-coast walk devised by Wainwright, you get sunburnt on the right side of your face only. As Judith had broken in a new pair of boots, we buried the old pair somewhere on one of the passes high above Borrowdale in what was then still Westmorland. It wasn't very environmentally friendly of us, but it felt right.

Many art galleries in many places. Three solid days in the Uffizi in Florence. Walking in the drizzle the long approach road to the Kröller-Müller museum outside Amsterdam. The Hermitage in Leningrad in Soviet days. Kettle's Yard in Cambridge when it was still managed by Jim Ede (he would pick up a Brancusi stone head, or a small cut brass piece by Gaudier-Brzeska, and put it into our hands). She introduced me to so many artists. As I have visited other places, I have found other treasures, and regret not having had the chance to show some of them to her. Just for example: Judith Shea's sculpture in the Hirschhorn in Washington, close to a version of Rodin's Balzac, and called "Post-Balzac". It is a full-length bronze cape, upright and rounded as if on the shoulders of its owner, but actually empty.

The sitting room of our house in Peckham, the walls stripped and undecorated, but with marks and signs accumulated over a century and a bit. There is an area about 2ft square of brush marks in a darker paint, made by a house-painter cleaning his brush after painting some wood-work. Judith sees something in the shapes, and using a charcoal stick, makes some small additions. And it becomes a scene, a group of people in evening dress, top hats and the like, appropriate to some earlier era of the house's existence. We left the room unpainted for the best part of the 22 years we lived there, and it wasn't just because we never got around to it.

On a New York subway: Judith and me standing as there are no seats; she is 4 or 5 months pregnant at the time. A tiny middle-aged New York woman, sitting on a bench seat, observes the situation, and promptly, busily, without rising from her seat, makes everyone shuffle up in order to allow Judith to sit down. They obey her, all shapes and sizes of New Yorkers, like lambs. It is a memory that Judith treasures for the rest of her life.