Sending a Postcard to Julie in Iceland From San Miguel de Allende

It’s not something I take for granted though the ballpoint skates easily enough on the slick surface of the card and the stamp, a Mexican strawberry, 100 pesos, promises quick and efficient passage.

I jot down a few phrases about the clarity of the air in these mountains, so pure “light-headed” takes on a new meaning — a luminosity that keeps us drunk — and think of the lengthening nights you inhabit. What little-used knowledge does constant dark elicit? Or, more likely, it’s not constant, but a palette of varying greys, an old-master drawing lit by a few strokes of white.

Is the world new to you? Or is it just a species of memory, this landscape, as all landscapes are, and what’s new is yourself? As though the skin, that tough but flexible membrane, were merely a convention, an arbitrary boundary to keep the soul from dispersal. I will stop here, you decide, but the here is always changing.

In grade five we made papier-mâché planets, a yellow sun and silvery moon, imagined intergalactic conquest as we hurled them around the room. The next year our horizons narrowed to a topographical model of the earth — I liked the mountains of gritty plaster; painted oceans were never convincing. Later still, pages of maps detailed rainfall, crop rotation, statistics in coloured markers: a flat and abstract world.

I remember none of the numbers, can barely dredge up capital cities memorized as a schoolyard game. Anyhow, many of the names have changed. But I remember those planets whizzing by, the earth the size of an orange, the sun a grapefruit, the delicate moon a plum; their orbits fixed in my head forever.

Twenty years later those memories are what connects us, 7,000 miles apart as the crow flies if crows flew across the Atlantic. I ransacked three atlases looking for other links; found only volcanoes, earthquakes, the occasional hot-spring. Like Canada, Mexico and Iceland are mostly uninhabited — people live on the edges, the coasts valleys and plains — everything else is rock.

So I send you this card, a picture of where I am and you send me yours and in this way we annotate memory, bring our landscapes up to date. As I write, the late afternoon sun sends long shadows across the room and lights the flares of bougainvillea outside my window. The buds are orange, open blossoms a gentler rose; sunset flowers. Now the grackles fly down to roost in the jardin; purposeful birds whose harsh voices echo the corn-mills no longer grinding at this hour, the only thing lovely about them their extravagant tails.

And now the church-bells ring. Wind sifts the jacarandas, clouds stormy with oncoming night wash closer to the horizon and the bougainvillea goes out. How quickly day’s heat disperses once darkness comes down! Now I can imagine Iceland. Write soon. Tell me what you see, fill in our map.