The first time I went to Poland it was 2004 and the rain started falling as soon as the train crossed the Polish-German border. The rain smelled like England smells. The grass glowed green.

The second time I went to Poland I was still young and drank too much in whatever I could find that looked like it might be a rock bar. In Warsaw, in Gdansk, in Kraków. In places with names like Pod Gryfami, Wieloryb, Irish Pub. I asked for a bottle of ‘zaiwek’ while I sat on a rocking bench on a terrace in Warsaw’s old town square, painstakingly reconstructed to look like itself again. A place that both was and it wasn’t.

In 2005 I stood by the striped lines at the side of a wide road waiting to cross, waiting for the cars to stop to allow my safe passage. Six or seven minutes later an elderly lady with a Zimmer-frame walked along the pavement beside me, past me, and straight out into the road. I realised that in Poland it was me who needed to make the first move.

In 2007 I hitchhiked from Gdansk to Białystock Podlaskie. I learnt the word ‘botchan’, and how to skręcić w lewo. I met one of my host families on a market stall selling cabbages and carrots. I had a piece of paper with the registration number on, and was told to look out for a white van. All the vans were white, and all the registration numbers just one cyfer apart. Eventually I found my man. His daughter taught me the phrase ‘co to jest?’, and I learned that in Polish gardens on a hot summer’s night, wasps will swarm around your kiełbasy by the thousands. Every kilometre I hitched, there was a lady selling raspberries, a man selling honey.

In 2009 I moved to Koszalin. The first sentence I said was ‘stół z powyłamywanymi nogami’, over and over until it was perfect. I woke to the caw of seagulls, and seasons that were stoic and solid: three months of this one, three months of that, no messing around in between. Winter came and didn’t leave. I left, I came back, and there it was, lingering. It was March. Snow higher than the roofs of cars. Fluffy white mountains with wing mirrors. The land become cloud. One of my students told me she used to walk thirty minutes to work with the snow deeper than the tops of her knee-high snow boots. In England the country’s infrastructure falls apart at the slightest rain.

I went to the theatre and people still dressed like it meant something, the president died and people wore black to school and cried. I made arrangements and people turned up at exactly the right time. I was temporarily adopted by a string of cake-feeding Polish mothers. My cheeks were grabbed, smiles were thrust deep into my awkward eyes. Some of my students, born in the ‘50s, brought me a bottle of Zołądkowa Gorzka to class on my first week. They later took me on a day trip to Borne Silnowo and to a mysterious hill where the water flows upwards and you have to push cars down. I see those ex-students every year now, and now finally our mixture of languages is the same. Flowing up and down from English to Polish in a way that doesn’t make sense to anyone but each other, like the water on that zaczarowana góra. It’s beautiful.

In 2015 I spent a month living with a friend in Warsaw. I saw all the signs in English, in American-English. I saw all the craft beer bars and the coffee shops and the multinational company logos that never used to be there. I spent a month getting lost inside the weird layout of the Świętokrzyska metro station, ending up out on the street again every time I tried to swap lines. I spent a month going in and out of the oldest cinemas looking for Polish films, to listen to the sounds. I made friends with a lady in her late 40s whose English was a little less than my Polish, a treasure that in this internet-connected world is getting harder and harder to find.

She took me along with her two teenage daughters for an ognisko in the forest which skirts the city’s edge. Fires and sausages lined up to order, a clearing kept clear especially for the event. It was organised, it was calm, it was colloquial. Gangs of boys that should be driving fast cars and flipping the bird aggressively at society seemed nostalgic, unthreatening and happy as they egged each other on to down their Tyskie beers.

Last Christmas I went to Poznań, to Piła, and after having already experienced a Sylwester, a Wielka Noc, and a Śmingus Dingus, I finally absorbed my first Polish Boże Narodzenie. We put the choinka up and decorated it on December 23rd, shortly after my arrival straight off the Jan Kiepura train and on to another. On the 24th we had a black-out. Candles for 5 straight hours and not one single leaf blowing in the breeze. The mildest weather. The cars all looked like cars on the mild grey streets. The winter boots remained unsold this year. We went to midnight mass and I leaned forward and tried to understand it. We slept, we woke, my brain tuning in to the Polish again.

This Polish family so dry in their sense of humour. I begin to laugh without translation, I begin to get it. We peel the potatoes, cut them. We do it badly, a shambles. Our Polsko-Angielski salad. The rest of the family arrive. Our salad is the talk of the afternoon, potatoes just slightly the wrong size. Not at all like the Poles do it. I’ve unlocked a code finally, they are so funny, and my ears can interpret it. We play word games and watch Face/Off with a lektor. We sit quietly, we read, we speak.

The following morning we walk around the lake, examine the dachas, play on the outside gym in the park. I look at this family and think about how far I have come in my understanding of this nation, the vast number of nuances I have witnessed and had explained. Such as the way teenage Polish girls always have profile photographs of themselves holding flowers delicately in fields the way British girls never do. The way so many people still live in houses they have built themselves. The way they all go to the morze, and the way it is so similar to the Brytyjski morze in North Wales that I know from home, the way the sand dunes here and there resemble one another.

I love the way the language hasn’t morphed and changed as much as English, the way people’s surnames still mean things that actually still exist and are today still spelt the same: I think of Motyl, I think of Szczur, I think of Wnuk, I think of Rzepa. I love reading the map and translating the place names. I love the mountains, I love the hills, I love the corners. The way it is so familiar it doesn’t feel like travelling any more, it doesn’t feel remote or far away. I think of some of my favourite words, the ones that repeat in my head when I’m in Poland or in Manchester and practising. Words like noclegi, hurt detal, wielbłąd, łabędź, Słupsk, anything with a łu in it. I like trying to say skrzypce or sprzedawać as fast as I can. Prawdopodobnie, prostopadłościan, dżdżownica, międzynarodowy. The list goes on.

I love the way the communist blocks are all painted in pastel colours. I love the typography at the kwiaciarnias. In 2015, on my birthday, I finally paid the entrance fee and went to the top of the controversial Pałac Kultury i Nauki and looked down. It’s history, every little part of it, everything we are ever momentarily a part of. I love perplexing Polish people living in the UK: they have no idea why I can speak their language or why anyone would be so interested.