

## The Lost Pencil

by

Jenn Ashworth

Like many of us, for the past four months or so, I've been working from home and trying to balance educating my kids with my teaching and writing. It's a fine line, and I have generally failed to walk it because instead of working, I have been glued to the news and feeling both bored and anxious, impatient to be out in the world and suddenly frightened of it, both alone and – thanks to an out of control social media addiction – connected in ways that are overwhelming rather than nourishing. I have been struggling to imagine the future. I have been struggling to imagine anything at all. Instead of working, I've been walking.

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In very different circumstances, Virginia Woolf wrote about her own walking in an essay called 'Street Haunting' which she published in 1927. The essay is an account of a short solitary walk, and it is also a piece of literary haunting during which Woolf inserts her writing and observing self into a genre – that of the literary flaneur – that was exclusively male. At the very opening of the essay, Woolf invents an excuse to get out of the house – she is, she says, off out to get a pencil.

I've got plenty of pencils and for weeks now the shops have been closed, but I do have a dog and permission from the prime minister himself to get out for a daily dose of gentle exercise. Before lockdown, I used to walk in the relatively quiet, green places at the edges of Lancaster – Fenham Carr, Freeman's Wood, the cemetery across from Williamson's Park. But after the sudden emptying of the streets, I've found myself drawn to the city. My new lockdown walking route brings me through the streets of Freehold towards Moorgate. I join the canal towpath via the bridge just past The Gregson and walk along it southwards, popping back up into Lancaster

centre near the hospital, and making my way home via Penny Street, Market Street and Cheapside.

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Woolf was walking through London, and preferred a winter's evening, the streetlamps lit, the streets filled with others.

'We shed the self our friends know us by, she says, and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room.'

Her act of feminist haunting involved getting out in the city streets, and escaping from the domestic seclusion of the house – *A Room of One's Own*, where the solitary writing space becomes a similar means of escape – is still unwritten and lies a few years ahead of her.

I am not – not until the schools reopen – anywhere remotely near being sick of solitude, and though we're easing out of lockdown now I still choose the quiet times – the early mornings and late nights – to wander through the city's streets. I want to experience something of what Woolf talked about – that shedding of the every-day self, the purposeful self, the working and producing self, the obedient self, the self plugged into the world, consumed by it, addicted to its noise and demands. At the end of the essay Woolf contrasts the shifting, incoherent and 'variegated self' with the 'good citizen' – the settled being convenience and society requires a person to be. It's only when she's out and about, she suggests, roaming anonymously in the city streets, that she can be 'all of a mixture [...] varied and wandering'.

As I linger on the benches in front of TK Maxx, watching my dog chase the pigeons in the empty market square I think about ghosts, about haunting. About how the refuge of home has suddenly turned into a place of work, about how I do have a writing room of my own, but thanks to a decent laptop and good Wi-Fi, most days it feels like the entire world is in there with me.

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There is something very strange about a busy place, emptied of its people. Where is everyone? Staying at home. Staying safe. Staying alert. The city centre shoppers – good citizens all – have been raptured back to their bedrooms and sitting rooms and to be here three times in the same day, coveting the packets of Sharpie Markers on display in the window of Ryman’s, is tantamount to an act of civil disobedience.

I see traces of these missing people. One morning, at 7am, I notice that someone – perhaps a child – has drawn pictures of flowers and rainbows and butterflies in chalk on the pavement outside Claire’s Accessories. There are new signs everywhere – mutual aid helplines, advice on social distancing – a big one in the window of Lush, reminding disappointed customers about their website, and promising to be back soon. In *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*, Robert McFarlane uses the Tibetan Buddhist word ‘shul’ to describe ‘a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by’. These chalk marks are ‘shul’. So are the empty beer cans on the steps of the town hall. So are the footprints of what looks like another walker and her dog tracked through a puddle, so is the stink of piss on the steps of Nicolas Arcade car park and so is a path. Any path. Shul brings the past into the present. Is a ghost a kind of shul too?

You can, of course, get carried away with yourself. And often I do, and indulge the strangely narcissistic thought that perhaps the missing people really are there, and it’s me that isn’t. There. Or here. Maybe this is what being a ghost is like: everyone else carries on as usual, only I can’t see or hear or touch them. Their street is not my street, and the two worlds have come apart somehow. The litterbins are always full, though I’ve never seen anyone throw something away.

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The streets may be empty, but I am not really alone. I am using my daily walks to listen to a 25 hour-long audiobook narration of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

The book, published in 1927, is Heidegger's attempt to, in his own words, 'work out the matter of the sense of being and do so concretely'. It is a famously difficult and controversial work. All the same, when lockdown began in late March, I deliberately used my Audible credit on something very long and very difficult, ignoring the objections of friends who were worried, I think, that impressionable as I am, I might catch Heidegger's thinking and lose my way, as he did. His philosophy is forever contaminated by his anti-Semitism: Heidegger joined the Nazi party in 1933.

I am no philosopher, no historian of ontological thought: my ambitions were very modest: I would use this book to mark the time. An hour or so of walking every day, sometimes more. 25 hours of Heidegger. Surely lockdown would be over and the city streets full of people again by the time me and *Being and Time* were finished with each other?

Today it is raining and the pubs are going to open this weekend and Heidegger and I are not done with each other yet. I am a poor student. An idle listener. Sometimes I am concentrating as well as I can, trying to figure out what the chapters about gloves and hammers and Idle Talk have to do with Heidegger's attempt to engage with a question he said other philosophers have ignored: what it means to be. At other times, the line of his argument evaporates, my attention wanders away and the narration is just a traffic hum in the background, some difficult company, and a backdrop to other, more mundane mental wanderings.

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The psycho-geographers, the flaneurs and the romantic poets all have something to say about journeys inwards and outwards, the way the rambling body can contain or guide a rambling mind, the way the digressions and loops of a spontaneous route can map or influence or even dictate the contours of a mind or sentence.

It was the German painter Paul Klee (whose work was declared indecent in 1933 by the Nazi party – the same year that Heidegger joined it) who said that a line was merely a dot off for a walk, a drawing merely a walking line. Of course he means the type of line made by a pencil, but I can't help but think about *Map My Run*,

which I have running on my phone in my coat pocket: I always want to measure how far I've come and the app tracks the walk with a blue line on a map of Lancaster. All marks are paths and Johnny Cash reminds us that 'to walk the line' is both to behave yourself – to be 'a good citizen' – and to find some murky but inhabitable space between contrasting positions. I imagine a tightrope, and looking at the box of OS Maps in the window of the Oxfam bookshop, wonder what it would mean to fall off. I imagine the line running through a city, through a street, through a self.

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Heidegger, who spent a lifetime trying to unpick the strangeness of the self in its surroundings often compared the work of the philosopher to a slow blind trudge through dark woods. His most common metaphorical register was the landscape around the hut where he worked in the Black Forest. For him, thinking was the same as navigating the hill, the path, the woods, the mountain, the valley and the clearing. Heidegger did not only use his walking to say something about the self, but found that in some way the self had been made by walking. He knew that we did not only come to know a place best by walking through it but that in a way that is both everyday and mysterious, we could become known by our surroundings, or created or explored by them. His work is full of these logical loops that get us nowhere: I'm nineteen hours into the book and I do not think I understand him any better than I did when I started.

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My lines, whether I fail to walk them or not, are sentences and there's something about an after-tea stroll with no particular destination in mind that feels just like writing does.

I've been thinking about this piece of writing a lot, doing the pre-writing wondering as I wander. I'm also trying to finish a novel, and I have a short story that needs attention too, and I promise myself I will use my walk productively and either

apply myself to Heidegger or to my own writing. Sometimes I do, but more often I am compiling a shopping list or indulging in a revenge fantasy or feeling guilty for not responding to an email or pretending that this week I really will paint over the damp patch in the bathroom. I have thoughts that I bring out to enjoy on my walks like treats from the sweetie drawer. For example: it is always the dog walker or the early morning jogger who discovers the murder victim in crime novels. In the world of television, the woman walking through the city alone after dark is only ever a police procedural waiting to happen.

I do try to Stay Alert, as the government advises, for murder victims and muggers and rapists as well as viruses and the possible contaminations of Heidegger, but sometimes, in spite of myself, I manage to do nothing at all, and only count my steps, feel sweat cooling on the back of my neck, notice the way my breathing has slowed and the constant internal chatter has receded if not stilled. When that happens it's like being in motion and still at the same time, walking and going nowhere or in Klee's quantum terms, being both a dot and a line.

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I like the idea of the walker as someone other than the lonely explorer, bravely striking out into unknown territory and conquering it by forcing it into the realm of what is understood. Woolf emphasises in 'Street Haunting' that she was where she should not be – where a woman had no reason to be – and the errand to buy a pencil was not only an excuse, it was an alibi. This freedom she found through walking was not only about changing her surroundings – getting out of the house and being *there* rather than *here*, it was also to do with *how* she could be. The 'variegated self' that walked the streets was someone quite different than the self indoors.

In the narrow alley down the side of Wilkinson's I sometimes use as a short cut towards Dalton Square solely so I can look in the windows of the little jewellery shop on Gage Street, I feel myself as something other than a 'good citizen'. I have a novel to finish and children to educate and I do not have time for the town centre

rambling I seem to be compelled to do these days. Most days, when I walk I feel like a taxi with the meter running. My solo wandering time is truant time. When I leave the house I tell the kids I'll be back in forty minutes and while I'm out they've got to get the dishes washed, dried and put away. I set an alarm on my mobile phone just in case, distracted by Heidegger or the empty shop windows, I play truant for too long or even (this is a possibility I fantasise about every day) wander off the film set of my life and disappear entirely. I must 'keep a close watch on this heart of mine', especially when untethered from home.

The Zen Buddhists recommend a walking meditation called Kinhin – this is a way of exploring with your body the very Zen idea that no matter where you wander, there is nowhere else to go and sometimes I taste little moments of that – the surrender to the ordinary world, the experience of being formed by what surrounds me, the moments where I can allow myself to be brought gently into line with what is.

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The alarm interrupts the audiobook and lets me know I've walked half my time and it's time to start retracing my footsteps.

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When Woolf returns home after her walk she reverently regards her pencil – the only spoil she's brought back with her. It's more of a holiday souvenir than a trophy, and I imagine her writing her essay with it.

On my walks, there's sometimes a police car, slowly driving through the pedestrianized centre. You are allowed to walk, but you are not allowed to loiter, so when I see the car, I get up from the bench, put the dog back on the lead and make several slow loops waiting for my alarm to go off and getting startled by the movement of my reflection in the windows of Timpson's every time I pass it.

It strikes me that if someone really was watching me on these walks – the police officers in their car, or some security guard tucked up safe in an observation deck somewhere far away, multiple screens broadcasting the city’s CCTV footage, or a mugger set on lifting my mobile phone or the emergency fiver I keep in the lining of my cagoule – well – that watching person would think I was looking for something. That I was, perhaps, obsessively tracing and retracing my footsteps to locate a lost pencil of extraordinary sentimental value.



‘The Lost Pencil © Jenn Ashworth 2020 is one of two podcasts commissioned by Litfest with support from an ACE Emergency Covid-19 Fund grant. If you enjoyed it, you might like to listen to or read Polly Atkin’s ‘The Road North Through’.

And if you are inspired to make your own podcast go to [www.litfest.org/walking-solo](http://www.litfest.org/walking-solo) for guidelines on how to do this and to read Polly Atkin's and Jenn Ashworth's 'Tips and Advice' for shaping and recording a podcast.

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May the road rise to meet you – whether you’re out there in fact, in memory or in imagination, we’re all explorers.