The Road North Through

by

Polly Atkin

Come with me. We'll go for a walk together.

Meet me in Galgate, on the bridge over the canal, and we can take that circuit, you know the one, just following the tow path towards the wide curve of the waxing Lune. We will walk a grassy path by a channel of calm water and might never think of what is buried in the silt, or concealed beneath the mirrored surface. We'll cross locks together, stop at the Mill Inn for a drink and a bite. It will be bright day, not too hot. We'll talk to the ducks at Glasson Dock. We'll choose which boats we'd live on if we weren't us. We'll look out onto the Lune Estuary and imagine ourselves as wrecks, sinking into the mud or rising out of it. The horizon will be hazy. Blue leaching into brown.

It doesn't matter that we're walking in our heads, not on the ground. It doesn't matter that we're not physically present in the same space. You can't touch me on the arm to draw my attention to a bird singing, high in a tree above us as we pass underneath it, or an old sign painted on the side of a building. We're still together, but differently. Still there, but differently.

We can walk as far as we like and not get tired. We don't need to worry about the light fading, or our feet aching. We can stop time. We can turn time.

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When I moved to Lancaster in September 2006 I knew nothing about the city, no one in it. I'd moved to start a PhD at Lancaster University, knowing my research would take me to the Lake District within the year. I moved North to Lancaster knowing it was only a rest stop, a kind of holding pen, until I could go further North. Further North was the subject of my studies: how a place becomes a place through the ways people live in it, work in it, write about it, visit it.

I rented a cottage in Galgate, the first home I had ever had to myself. I moved with limited possessions and bits of family furniture that had lived with many of us through the years. My parent's old bed I'd grown up with in Nottingham, sawn down by my dad to fit the sloping walls of the bedroom; my great uncle's wardrobe and chest of drawers my middle brother once had in a flat in Manchester; my granny and grandpa's kitchen table from their house in Dumfriesshire.

I chose Galgate partly because of its name. When I saw there was a cottage to rent there I looked the village up, and read that the name came from Old English, Gal Gata, the road to Scotland. I had a vague unformed plan that my move North was the first step in moving to Scotland, and the name seemed gloopy with meaning. Later, when I started my research, I would see in this feeling the echo of the 'prophetic sentiment' Thomas De Quincey had when he lived in London that the course of his life would take him North, drawn by what he called the 'deep deep magnet […] of Wordsworth'.[1]

I didn't yet know I'd fall in love with Cumbria and get stuck on this side of the border.

Looking Galgate up now, fourteen years later, I get a different etymology: *Galwaithegate* – the road north through Cumbria, *the road to Galloway.* Still Scotland, but not where I thought I was going. Back closer to where some parts of me began.

I liked the idea of living somewhere completely different to the home I had left in East London. I was afraid of translating my whole life, then finding it was an error.

In London I had walked a lot, sometimes to save travel fares, sometimes for space, or to pace something out, with a restlessness and stamina I now find hard to imagine my pained body could have harboured. I walked holes in my cheap pumps. I walked through snow and rain storms. I walked alone. I walked with friends. I walked home from the city by moonlight and into the city in sun. I learnt the city by walking, and understood this was how we know places. Through our feet, through passing slowly through, slowly enough to look keenly and broadly.

So when I moved, I walked. In my first week in Galgate I tried to go to a party at a friend of a friend's in town, missed the only evening bus, and walked four and a half miles to Freehold.

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[1] Thomas De Quincey, 'Sketches of Life and Manners; from the Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater', (October 1840), *Works*, in *The Works of De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop and others (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), II, p. 258.

Daily, I walked to campus up the back lane, past the small industrial estate in the old silk mill, past St John's church and its stubby tower, past the cows in their fields, the pastoral graveyard, and cottages and Victorian villas I would daydream of living in. I walked through Autumn into Winter and out into Spring. I valued the repetition with variance more than I could ever have anticipated. I still think of that walk, particularly in winter, the glow of the windows in the church beacons in the afternoon dark, promising sanctuary, signalling I was half-way back to a home of my own.

In London I had lived by the Regent's Canal in Mile End. As a student, and later, as a teaching assistant, I walked to classes along the canal tow path. So when I found myself alone in a strange place I sought the place where the strange met the familiar: a walk along the tow path.

I can take this walk in memory now. It is backlit by the yellowy sun of autumn or late spring afternoons, and luminous as stained glass.

It is fuzzy around the edges. Each walk blurs into each.

In my memory I am walking over myself and through myself over and over, through and through.

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The Lancaster Canal was built to transport goods. Canals offered an ease of movement roads could not deliver. The first section of the Lancaster Canal was opened in 1797; the main branch in 1819. Histories of the canal talk of the ingenuity of engineering and of industry. The Lune Aqueduct, that carries the canal across the river, sixty-two feet above it, is called a 'wonder of the waterways'. A plaque on the aqueduct declares it works in the service of 'public prosperity'. But who is the public imagined to prosper by its works? Who is left out? A second inscription in Latin is rendered in one translation to 'Old needs are served, far distant sites combined/Rivers by art to bring new wealth are joined'.

When we do not know a place it is easy to read the landscape as detached from its history. A white woman walks alongside a road of water and thinks *how beautiful, how tranquil*. How splendid a view. Its histories do not pull at her. She can choose not to know them.

Let's pause her there a moment, as she stands in front of the transcription she can't decipher. Whose wealth is joined by whose art? Whose needs are served? What is she walking past and not seeing?

Black Lives Matter protests in Lancaster this summer have reminded the city of the source of its wealth: the trade in and labour of enslaved people. In the eighteenth century Lancaster was the fourth largest port trading in enslaved people in England. Over 29,000 enslaved Africans were transported by Lancastrian enslavers between 1736 and 1807. Lancaster's prosperity is underpinned by the enslavement of people. Trade was limited only by the shallowness of the Lune. In 1787 the dock was built at Glasson to accommodate tall ships sailing to Africa, the Indies and America that could not sail into town. It is the oldest tidal dock in England. Then, it was the largest dock in the North-West. All this invention, all this creativity, to enable and enabled by the most devastating of trades. The Glasson branch of the canal, which we walked down in memory, was opened in 1826, to connect the docks to trading centres in Liverpool and beyond. By 1830 over 10,000 tons of goods passed through the dock, most of it passing on to the canal.

I knew this and did not know this as I stared out over the mudflats at Glasson Dock, that looked to me like the end of the world. It followed me along the tow path, a cold spot, a shiver. No footfall on this land is not on someone's grave. In *Trace*, Lauret Savoy writes that 'we make our lives among relics and ruins of former times, former worlds. Each of us, too, is a landscape inscribed by memory and loss.'[2]

I wanted to know more about all of these landscapes, to understand them more, to be able to read them. I could not do this learning with my feet.

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Back in my cottage, built for workers at the Silk Mill, I read about Romantic wanderers and Romantic walkers. I read about Dorothy and William Wordsworth walking dozens of miles a day. I read of Thomas De Quincey trying to copy them, thinking that walking was the secret to Wordsworth's happiness, not seeing Wordsworth's own private miseries.

I read about how William Wordsworth is responsible for 'the first recorded instance

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[2] Lauret Savoy, 'Prologue: Thoughts on a Frozen Pond', *Trace* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015), n. p.

of the adjectival form, 'pedestrian' in a letter dated August 1791.'[3]

I read Thoreau on walking in which he writes about Wordsworth and walking. I read Solnit, in which she writes about Thoreau writing about walking. I too believed, as Solnit wrote, that 'walking is a mode of making the world as well as being in it'.[4]

I wrote about walking and writing, about walking as poetic work, or poetic work as walking. But I also wrote of how the entangling of walking and writing for William Wordsworth meant that composing a poem could bring on 'bodily derangement'.[5] Making a poem wore blisters into his heels because making a poem was walking the poem into being. Poetry left scars, cut flesh.

I read and I wrote about the people Dorothy and William met on the road, about the people that would call at their home in Grasmere because it sat on the road North. Dorothy's journal shows from its first entry caller after caller – many begging, some selling goods – whose histories Dorothy notates in her journal like an ethnographer, as she does the many fellow travellers they meet whilst actually on the road themselves. In November 1800 one of the callers is 'a merry African from Longtown'.[6] These figures on the road are translated from Dorothy's Journal into William's poetry: poeticized as the leech-gatherer, the discharged soldier, the old man travelling, Alice Fell, Benjamin the Waggoner. The road is a constant circuit of movement, of trade and travail. It is work and a place of work, unsettled, uncertain.

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I am writing this at a time when I could not take this walk, if I wanted to. This virtually walking essay was conceived during full Lockdown, when travelling from my home in Grasmere to Lancaster to take a walk I used to take years before would be deemed unnecessary, at the very best. But it wasn't just lockdown stopping me from taking the walk. In the years since I lived in Galgate, what was then intermittent joint and muscle pain has

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[3] Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 1.

[4] Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust*: *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 29.

[5] William Wordsworth, *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), p. 32.

[6] Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. by Pamela Woof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13 November 1800, p. 32.

become ongoing, insistent, incontrovertible. Walking was never an entirely neutral activity for me, but now I can never walk solo. I am always accompanied by pain. Pain is my shadow, my footfall, my breath. I can't go anywhere or do anything without it, and it changes everything I do. I wasn't without it then, but it was smaller, and came and went, flitting in and out of a knee, or a big toe, or a hip. Now it lives in me all the time, and I cannot leave it behind.

In their talk 'My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I also Love It & Want It to Matter Politically', Johanna Hedva, author of *Sick Woman Theory*, asks listeners to place a stone in their shoe to mirror how the background noise of continual pain and trauma disrupts experience.[7] Rocks were passed out to anyone in the audience who did not identify as having 'chronic illness, pain, injury, disability, or past trauma', including those who did not 'come from a colonised, displaced, or oppressed people, from a history of political, cultural, and racial trauma' recognising how the trauma of racism is held in and against the body.

Constant pain changes the relationship of the person to place and to moments in time. Overwhelming pain can take us away from the present, and stop us from enjoying being in a place, and moving in place.

Kate Davies, a Highlands-based writer and maker, has written about how after a stroke, walking changed for her, requiring her to give 'continual attention to [her] body's needs and behaviour' demanding she 'adap[t] to the environment.' But this adaptation can also make us more present, more aware. She writes:

> This forced work of adaptation (an activity familiar to all disabled walkers) means I have to develop a much closer connection to my immediate environment: I have to strive to understand the relationship of my body to the spaces and substances that surround it. Forced attentiveness comes with its own rewards.[8]

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[7] Johanna Hedva, 'My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I also Love It & Want It to Matter Politically'. <https://sickwomantheory.tumblr.com/post/138519901031/transcript-of-my-body-is-a-prison-of-pain-so-i>

[8] Kate Davies, 'back here', 6 May 2018. <https://katedaviesdesigns.com/2018/05/06/back-here/>

Like Davies, I walk slowly and quietly and stop a lot, and the compensation is that I see and hear things other people don't. I only begin to understand this through reading the accounts of other disabled walkers.

Poet, essayist and activist Eli Clare also writes about the rewards that come from moving slowly, differently though the world. Like me, he calls his 'relationship to gravity […] ambivalent', describing how he will 'slip, totter, descend stairs one slow step at a time.' But moving slowly and uncertainly opens a different world to him, a different way of knowing place. It is his 'shaky balance' that brings him into 'intimacy with the mountain'.[9]

When your life is broken down into a series of painful repetitive movements, you have to find joy in small things. Life is made of small things and many of them are painful. The ones which are not, are thrown into exquisite relief. Often for me these are interactions with other living creatures, reminders that life is various and continuous, despite my pain. An iridescent feather tucked into the grass. A bird at the window. A heron perched on a wrecked boat half buried in estuary sludge.

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I lived in Galgate for nine months before space opened up, and I moved to Grasmere. After eighteenth months in Grasmere, the attic room I lived in was declared unsafe, and I moved again, this time to the edge of Halton, the other side of Lancaster to Galgate, but again connected to the city by the canal. I moved in January, and a year later I was due to move again. I was half way through my writing up year, unfunded, ill. I was moving back to my parent's house. There would be no more home of my own. Snow came, and after the snow, ice. The roads iced over. The canals froze solid. I wrapped a long scarf around my face, put on my grandmother's sheepskin and walked to town along the canal. I crossed the Lune by the aqueduct, the frozen canal carried high above the icy river by stone. Both the tow path and the canal were white with compacted snow on compacted ice. Sky, canal and path all a uniform, matt grey-white.

When I reached Ridge, the outskirts of town, I saw children playing on the glacier of the canal, skidding along the ice, pushing each other in a shopping trolley on the glassy

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[9] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017), p. 88.

surface like a poundshop bob sleigh. A post-industrial frost fair. They could have come from any time. I could have fallen through time to reach them.

It was more tiring than I had accounted for, walking through the ice, thinking so hard about every placement of my feet. By the time I reached town I was exhausted, in much pain, brittle at the fringes. The glowing sky that had lit my walk over the water that crossed the water was dimming. I caught the bus and let it take me – seated, blasted with warm air – as close to home as it could.

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The road we have to take is not always the road we want to take. The road that takes us where we need to be is not always the one we meant to take. Sometimes we need to be told it is okay to give up on the road, to turn around, retrace our steps, go home or away from home, to sit down at the road's verge and refuse onwardness. What are we missing when we push on and on, striving for destination?

Come with me, along the road, but let's stop a while. Let's talk. Let's talk about what we know and don't know, about what we understand and can't. Let's talk about what we can't walk away from, or to. How the road is not the same for all of us, even if we seem to travelling side by side. How the road is not always a road at all. How we do not have to walk to move forward. How motion is not progression. How there are many Norths, and many roads through.

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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.