

Invisible Lines

Essays / Poems

Nancy Gaffield Mark Goodwin

Rob Hindle Chris Jones

Photographs

Emma Bolland Nikki Clayton

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Longbarrow Press



Wall art, St John the Evangelist, Corby Glen, Lincolnshire. Photograph by Emma Bolland.

The line of a walk is articulate in itself, a kind of statement.

In Praise of Walking, Thomas A. Clark

A path is a prior interpretation of the best way to traverse a landscape, and to follow a route is to accept an interpretation, or to stalk your predecessors on it as scholars and trackers and pilgrims do.

Wanderlust: A History of Walking, Rebecca Solnit

Invisible Lines is the third – and last – in a series of themed digital supplements published by Longbarrow Press. In this selection of poems and essays, Nancy Gaffield, Mark Goodwin, Rob Hindle and Chris Jones consider the relationship between movement and mapping, and the extent to which our itineraries (whether grounded or imaginative) are informed by cartographical detail (place names, topography) and subjective experience (happenstance, uncertainty, whim). The lines made by walking point forward (as in the northward trajectory of Gaffield's *Meridian*), sideways (the slow-stepping rail-balancing practised by Goodwin), and back (the histories uncovered by Hindle and Jones); and, sometimes, in all directions at once.

Brian Lewis

Sheffield, August 2020

Cartography, Flights and Traverses

Rob Hindle

*From the corner you could go anywhere, Leveson Street,
Warren Street, under the arches of Norfolk Bridge, over the river...*



This is a place in Attercliffe, Sheffield – an intersection, where the narrator of one of my poems in *The Footing*, and the historical subjects he is tracking, raise their eyes to the possibilities of the urban horizon. It's a point on a map; it is also a moment: a place reached, a pause in which the narrator's present (which was mine, sometime in 2010) collides

with the present of a gang of men, in the spring of 1925, walking away from a crime – a fatal attack on an Attercliffe man, for which two of them, a few weeks later, were to hang.

The title of my sequence is *Flights and Traverses*, chosen because I wanted to indicate how the poems describe movement away from a point (the 'flight') and also the phenomenon of that movement (the 'traverse' or crossing). But the sequence also has a subheading: *5 Itineraries*; and it had an earlier, working title: *A Cartography*. Both suggest the original motive: I wanted to follow footsteps – but I was also interested in the imaginative possibilities of mapping and the itinerary.

'Itinerary' has its roots in the Latin for 'travelling' and is usually understood to mean either a plan or a record of a journey: it can therefore refer to an experience anticipated or recollected. There is also something of the professional: it traditionally refers to a day's travel especially for the purpose of judging, or preaching, or lecturing. In many senses, it is a 'setting out'.

*

When we consider the word 'itinerant', however, the intention is less about professing, more about exchange. We think of salesmen or peddlers: tinkers: wanderers: tramps. A story or song from the road for a fag or a sup. There is something, perhaps, about a bargain or a contract. This is implicit in the flights and traverses I've chosen to map out. A man pays his way out of his homeland at the toll house on Grindleford Bridge:

Where are you going?
Far as I can.
When will you get there?
Evening.
Where have you come from?
Over the moor.
Will you return?
Never.

He accepts the deal; and intrigued, taken in, I follow. Here is a story: a narrative: a passage from something known to something unknown.

I have a memory of childhood: a halt on a moorland track, my dad 'getting the map out', taking bearings, making judgements. We are at the moment between getting lost and finding a way forward – between the original itinerary and a new route, made at that moment and not until then. I find this moment entirely creative, and settling, and inspiring. We might be on a track thousands of years deep, but in passing along it, we are itinerant: we are at a point between the journey recorded and the journey anticipated. And when we stop and take bearings and judge our

surroundings, we acknowledge this. I now stop with my family and 'get the map out'.



There's a milepost on the old turnpike road over Houndkirk Moor. What you can't see, obviously, is the other side – which, due to the weather, is a pitted surface, entirely illegible.

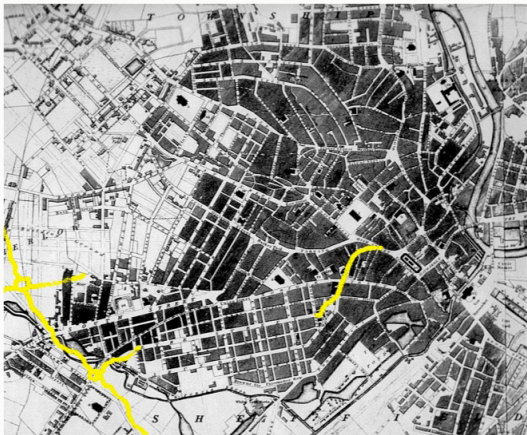
Between a dry green wall and the brown clatter of water
a milepost
Tidswell – 10
Buxton – 17
WH
JF

On the north face just runes and weather.

My ancestor Richard Marsden, traversing the Moor and in sight neither of the valley he grew up in, or of the town to which he was headed, is at this point itinerant. He must make a new map.

*

On midsummer's day in 1842, an Attercliffe woman walked out of her house, set herself behind the coffin of her son and started the slow walk through Sheffield to the General Cemetery. The cortege passed 50 thousand people, come to observe the procession of the Chartist Samuel Holberry, broken by hard labour in Northallerton Gaol and dead at 27.



When I set out on this journey, the maps I consulted were relics: the Blitz of 1940 and the go-getting 1960s had done for the medieval town. Had I found a record of the route taken – most likely along Norfolk Street, Union Street and South Street, then up Cemetery Road – I would have felt compelled to follow it: The Crucible, Café Rouge, the drills and hoardings on The Moor. Fortunately, I found only the barest details: a connection between two points, and an understanding that the route must have crossed the river at Lady's Bridge, where there had been a travellers' chapel,

a plate by the chancel where you'd drop a coin for safe journey,
the water light through the glass
pattering the walls

I had the opportunity, then, to make my own path: to drift: to become itinerant. I could go off-grid, turn corners into quiet, slower route-ways, peer through smashed windows.

They turn into Eyre Lane,
its workshops full of shades.

These were his neighbours;
they have stilled their wheels
and files for him.

I could stop and notice things growing – now in the middle of the city, then at its edge, the sounds of its industry still proximate to the rush of the Porter Brook:

In an alley near South Lane
someone has planted flowers
in drums and pails:
poppies, daisies, nasturtiums;
sweet peas, pink and lilac
against the black brick.



Over the Brook – now, over the Ring Road – I should have climbed the hill to the old gate on Cemetery Road, with its worm and leaf mould *all ruin and renewal*. But, honouring Holberry, I wanted to make a way to the grander entrance on Cemetery Avenue: to cross the Porter Brook once more, formally this time, paying my dues of passage

into the underworld, from where I could look back, take stock:

Now they can see where they came,
the line of people all the way back
to the town. Still they come.

*

There are other ways of map-making. In 1932, my great-uncle Harold died in the South Yorkshire Asylum – later called the Middlewood Hospital, and now a housing development which, with its tidiness and discreet cameras, aspires to gated status.

I never knew I had a great-uncle Harold. He spent most of his life in institutions – his learning difficulties presumably too much for the wider world to handle – and died in this one aged 27.

This was the first journey I took – a short, harrowing walk from his parents' house off Hillsborough Corner to Middlewood. It is the most personal section of *Flights and Traverses*: not only because of Harold, but because I recognise these terraced streets:

Now there is the click of a back door,
the chitter of a budgerigar.
Then you are hurrying from one of these houses,
hair brushed, tangled feet booted,

your undone laces tripping behind you.
I follow.

There is something inevitable, too, about the journey which, though in terms of its topography is a gentle climb, is emotionally and psychologically a descent. I follow Harold towards his end, beyond the tram terminus; and I walk back – and down – through a bit of my own past:

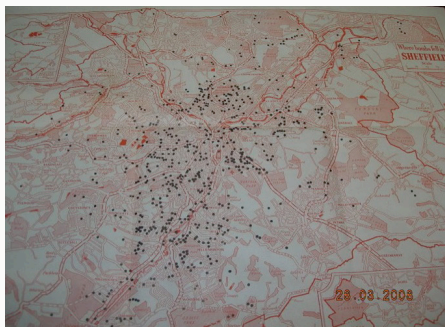
This was once my territory, that hill with the GR
post box at the bottom, school at the top,
the park where I rushed along one day, my mind,
gleeful and vicious, running after me. Middlewood,
childhood cant, that thing in all our cellars,

I shouldn't have dared. I pay out my breaths
like twine, each step shortening.

I expected ghosts at the Asylum, in the bottle-green shade of the Cemetery, by the milepost on Houndkirk Moor. I got glimpses: stilled vices through workshop windows, arches upturned on the skin of the river, the ghost of myself in the glass of Saville House. Walking through an urban landscape, particularly, enables you to accrue perspective: there is a traversing of time as well as space. You lose yourself, take note, adjust your bearings, set out again. Cutting away from current thoroughfares, you pass into other ways, older, narrower, quieter. You uncover or discover gennels, doorways, rat runs: even when you are tracing itineraries which are irrevocable, you are making new paths, unfurling the twine of a narrative by which to mark your way back.

Where I finish in *Flights and Traverses* is a picture of chaos:

Stained glass exploding into Campo Lane,
corn from a slashed sack.



The map shows where, in December 1940, the bombs fell, which was everywhere, just about; but even this catastrophe can be narrated. The bombers came from a point in space, departed for another; the bombs fell thinly on the leafy places, thickly on the old centre; they fell crashing into the silence of the school,

but spared the church,
its praying faithful, its sinners.

When I get off the bus on the Hathersage Road, it is a winter afternoon, the sun near to setting. The shires range southwards, hills, woods, fields. North, across the boundary stream, the road begins its descent into Sheffield. My long shadow stretching out in front of me,

I start down.

First published on the Longbarrow Blog, 12 January 2014.

Ecgbert

People lust for this place,
its arrangement of copses and small fields,
hills layering the light into the south.

It is a no man's land: a glamour
between the high emptiness
and a ditch of water.

Dore – an end and a beginning:
King of Wessex and Mercia
come to take oaths from York.

A car pelts past me into Old England,
Ecgbert's broad *scīrs* laid out like a cloth
napped by the tread of his armies' *blitzkrieg*.

The sun sets my shadow in the road north;
I start down into the city,
its roofs pale along the tree-line.

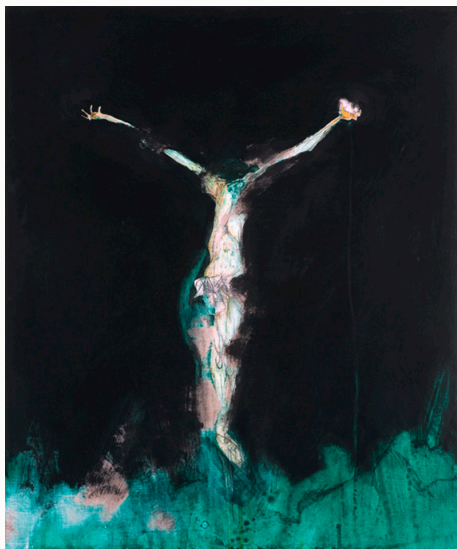
scīrs OE shires

Rob Hindle

'Ecgbert' is the first poem in Rob Hindle's sequence 'Dore Moor to the Marples Hotel', which closes *Flights and Traverses*, five long poems and sequences by Hindle that appear in the Longbarrow Press anthology *The Footing* (2013).

The Idea of Walsingham

Chris Jones



I've never been to Walsingham. I've got to within about six miles of the village: an old white signpost with black lettering pointed the way. If I ever journeyed that way I would probably end up disappointed. For all its status as that most rare of things – a Catholic shrine, a place of holy pilgrimage in England – my feeling is I'd find it wholly underwhelming – that shot at chintzy religiosity, that sense of a miracle-ground somehow not quite believing in itself as special under those dull Norfolk skies. I literally like the sound of 'Walsingham' – the name itself has a mythic quality to it, a sense

of England of old, an England that never really existed. More pertinently, I think I'm drawn to the idea of Walsingham as it is represented in the piece of literature that first drew my attention to its existence – Robert Lowell's poem 'A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket'. Alongside those rather far-off, alien descriptions of whaling around Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Lowell – all of a sudden – goes on an imaginative pilgrimage to England: 'the world shall come to Walsingham'.

I do have an interest in places that are name-checked in literature – in poems, in particular, though I don't go on expeditions to find these locations out. Better by far to come on East Coker by accident. I certainly don't think of Larkin every time I step on the platform at Sheffield station ('Dockery and Son') though my head did turn once on a road out of Galway when I saw a sign for a village flagged up in Paul Muldoon's 'The Sonogram': 'on the road to Spiddal, a woman hitching a ride'. For 'Spiddal', Muldoon informs us, read 'hospital' (c.f. Spittle Hill in Sheffield; Spitalfields in London). Some of my most vivid memories – in this regard – are of coming on Irish place names with a literary connection. During a car ride from Belfast

to Donegal I realised we were heading into territory mapped out by Seamus Heaney when we drove past Toome (see the poems ‘Toome’, ‘The Toome Road’, ‘At Toomebridge’). Perhaps more spectacularly for me – because it was so unexpected – I drove through Oughterard on a grey autumn afternoon back in the 1990s. Michael Furey, Gretta’s long-deceased lover in James Joyce’s story ‘The Dead’, came from Oughterard. As I drove through the town, I thought then and there that Michael wouldn’t be worrying himself over women like Gretta any more – he would be playing golf.

I once went on a camping holiday to the coastal town of Levanto in Liguria, Northern Italy. Although the town is situated near to the enigmatically titled Golfo dei Poeti (Bay of Poets), this semiotic prompt in no way prepared me for the dark frisson I felt when I came across a crossroads signpost vaguely aimed in the direction of Lerici. Byron, Mary Shelley, and Percy Bysshe Shelley stayed there for a while on their tour of Europe. Well, to be more accurate, the Shelleys lodged further along the coast; Lerici is the port where Percy moored his boat, the boat that tipped him into the ocean on the 8th of July 1822. I first came across the word ‘Lerici’ in a poem by Thom Gunn when I was about fifteen years old. Where is this place, I thought? And that’s the imaginatively constructed space I thought about when I came, twenty years later, to within a couple of miles of the town, Gunn’s Lerici: ‘Shelley was drowned near here. Arms at his side / He fell submissive through the waves.’ One morning I travelled up the coast to Genoa on the fast train. About halfway through the journey the loco rattled through Rapallo – the station’s name plate there and gone in an instant – and I waved at Ezra Pound’s sullen ghost standing on the platform.

Occasionally I come on places that clarify or add texture to the readings of poems in which they are mentioned. The best example of this I can give relates to a work by W. S. Graham: ‘The Thermal Stair’. The poem begins:

I called today, Peter, and you were away.
I look out over Botallack and over Ding
Dong and Levant and over the jasper sea.

That ‘Ding / Dong’ used to throw me. Was Graham talking about a church and its bells or was he being whimsical, a manner he cultivates now and then in his writing? Nearing our destination on a long drive down to Zennor, Cornwall (Graham country), we stopped at the crossroads of some leafy lane and there, to my right, was a peeling sign pointing the way to Ding Dong. It had never occurred to me

Ding Dong was an actual, constructed space, that it had the same kind of veracity and tenor as say Frome, Swindon, or Quorn. Go on, look it up, Ding Dong moor.

For all my interest in place names and poetry, I don't often pin my pieces explicitly to a locale, a parish, a street. I did write a sequence of poems about the River Don and named various districts of Sheffield as part of the process of tracking its journey through the city, but most of the time I don't push towards this kind of poetry *vérité*. When I wrote the extended poem 'Death and the Gallant', a work concerned with pre-Reformation wall art and its destruction, I wondered about providing the action with a precise geographical 'fix'. I ruminated on the idea of a hidden or remote valley somewhere but in the end decided against naming names in this broadest sense. A real location would have meant me knuckling down to do a lot more research about the environment, the lie of the land: I just wanted to get on and write the poem. For all this regional vagueness, there are two churches named in 'Death and the Gallant' in the hope that it embeds a line of authenticity into the narrative. I spent ages poring over possible saints and in the end came up with Saint Botolph's (church one) because it's a strange and wonderful name and Botolph was the patron saint of travellers, and Saint Anne's (church two) because I wanted a saint with a monosyllabic name to accommodate the opening line of that particular section I was thinking about ('Saint Anne's. The Passion on a southern wall'). From thereon in, specificity only really occurs in other aspects of the poetry: the description of wall art decorating various (unnamed) churches, and what these images signified to people in seventeenth century England.

The artwork accompanying this piece is by Paul Evans (from the series *Death and the Gallant*, a response to Chris Jones's sonnet sequence of the same name). An earlier version of this essay first appeared on the Longbarrow Blog, 31 August 2015.

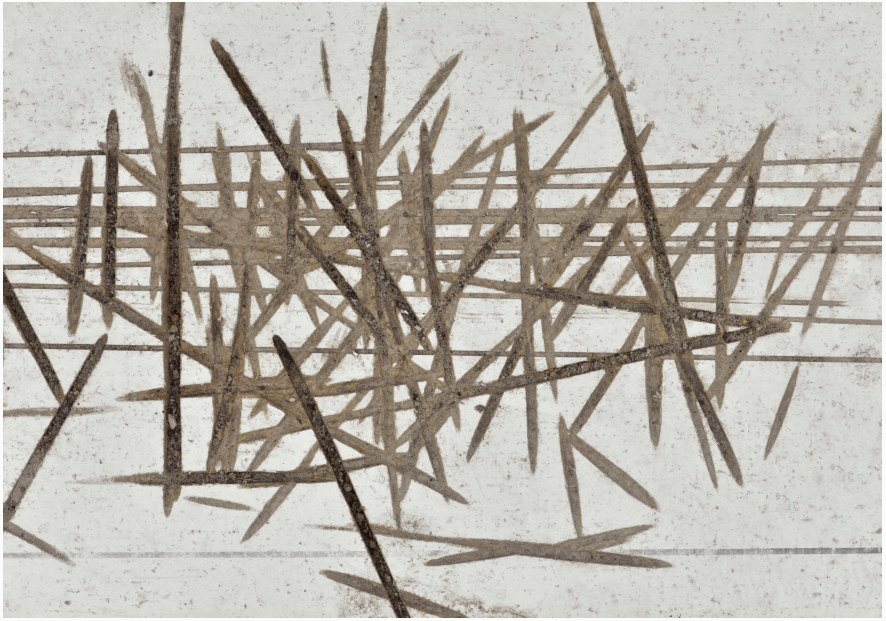
The Crucifixion

Saint Anne's. The Passion on a southern wall.
When Nicodemus hefts his body down
this artist shows by Christ's pulled arms
the frame is slight yet burden's all.
As Brown stirs water into pails of chalk
I trail my shadow round this Lord's demesne –
closed cottages, forge, tavern, farm –
to root out screens made scarce and shrouded panels.

I've dug up roods like briars from a ditch,
once found a Christopher standing in a yard.
Doused in this wheat-ears' ruby light
I absolve my eyes from searching hard.
I turn a bottle's murky shine, then lift
it high to pledge my disregard.

Chris Jones

'The Crucifixion' is the third poem in Chris Jones's sequence 'Death and the Gallant', first published in the Longbarrow Press anthology *The Footing* (2013), and subsequently in Chris Jones's collection *Skin* (Longbarrow Press, 2015).



From *The Impossibility of Abstraction* (2019), Karl Hurst

The First Cut
Nancy Gaffield

February 2016



In her long poem *Drift*, Caroline Bergvall says, “Eventually one comes to a point where being lost can signal a starting point.” She refers to this process as “to north oneself”. This statement is an accurate description of my own long poem, *Meridian*. I am following the Greenwich Meridian line along public footpaths and bridleways from Peacehaven to the Humber in order to investigate the way that landscapes are disturbed

and reordered by history and memory. *Meridian* is a long poem about time, walking and lines: lines, both real and imaginary, in all their forms. It is also a walking practice, walking in the Wordsworthian sense of “a mode not of travelling, but of being”—a process that implicates both mind and body on equal terms. I want the shape of the poem to be determined by the rhythm of walking—the measure of the step to shore up the measure of the line, alternating long Whitmanesque lines with the shorter, stepped lines of William Carlos Williams, undulating like the contours on the Ordnance Survey maps. On my walk I am in dialogue with a number of companion poets: Lorine Niedecker, Helen Adam, John Clare, Iain Sinclair—to name but a few.

I chose to write *Meridian* as a long poem. Charles Altieri defines the long poem as one which desires “to achieve epic breadth by relying on structural principles inherent in lyric rather than narrative modes.” To do this, the long poem incorporates other texts, voices, political speech, bits of memory whilst foregrounding the writer’s role in making her way through such often-resistant material. Indeed, the process of writing of such a text is often part of the material—it is self-reflexive. The long poem itself is a challenge—both for reader and writer, for example: how to maintain a

sense of momentum and coherence, how/when to end it; choosing the most effective form. On the other hand, it offers greater space to develop ideas; it can be an ongoing work that you do alongside other projects; it offers the potential for panoramic treatment of a thing; it can bring in other registers, discourses, genres. Since the early 20th century, experiments in innovative, language-based long poems, often disjunctive in form, have been gathering momentum. In particular, I'm interested in long poems by women: Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Rosmarie Waldrop's *The Reproduction of Profiles*, Susan Howe's *The Europe of Trusts*, Sharon Doubiago's *Hard Country*, Lynn Hejninian's *A Border Comedy*, not to mention very long poems like Rachel Blau duPlessis' *Drafts*. These poems often recover political, philosophical or historical material, and pay close attention to the way language, especially its rhythms, silences, gaps, conventions and expectations, engages with the reader.



In 2015 I was beginning to think about what my next full collection would be, and I knew I wanted the work to be informed by the ideas, concepts and methods of psychogeography. Around that time I was reading books like Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks*, Roger Deakin's *Wildwood*, Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*, Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*, Peter Davidson's *Distance and Memory*—so I knew landscape/geography would once again feature in whatever I was to write, but ratcheting it up a notch by incorporating psychogeographic ideas.

As Guy Debord accurately said, psychogeography is a concept with “a rather pleasing vagueness.” His Lettrist International Group in the 1950s were investigating urban space through desire rather than habit. To do this, they explored different ways of getting lost: for example, by hiking through the Harz region in Germany using a London map as a guide. However, in general, psychogeography studies the affects and effects of the built environment on the emotions and actions of individuals. It embraces chance and coincidence, concurrent with an alertness to

patterns and repetitions arising from the collision between the chaos of the urban environment and the personal history of the individual. It involves a range of activities that raise awareness of the natural and cultural environment around the walker; the walker is attentive to senses and emotions as they relate to the environment; it is serious but fun; it is often political and critical of the status quo. One of the key concepts within psychogeography is that of the *dérive*, an informed or aware wandering through a varied environment using continuous observation. *Dérive* = drift, aimless wandering through a place, guided by whim and the awareness of how different spaces both attract and repel. The walker attempts an interpretive reading of the city and its architecture by engaging in a playful reconstruction. This turning around (*détournement*) is key to the situationist agenda; it is a dialectical tool useful to expose hidden ideology.¹ The psychogeographer is seeking new ways of apprehending the environment, excavating the past and recording it with the present, revealing the nature of what lies beneath.

My own engagement arose initially out of a particular challenge: finding my way. I can't read a map, or a compass—and, as a result, am always lost. Not only is this a huge frustration, when lost, I am susceptible to panic attacks, so I thought I could learn the rudimentary skills of navigation whilst writing my poem. I also wanted it to have a Kentish connection, so I gradually came to the idea of the Greenwich Meridian as a way to organise the walk in time/place. (Greenwich was part of the County of Kent until 1889.) Happily, then, I discovered the series of guidebooks written by Graham and Hilda Heap, which take the walker primarily on footpaths and bridleways along the Greenwich Meridian from Peacehaven in East Sussex to Sand le Mere in East Yorkshire—total length 275 miles. Around this time, Iain Sinclair came to Kent as a Visiting Professor. I started to read *London Orbital* and had the opportunity to speak with him about that as well as what I was doing. His process, he explained, always seemed to happen in four parts. There is a statement of place before a stepping out into a quest/journey. That is followed by a dark night of the soul moment that tries to undo the simplicity of the journey and takes you somewhere you didn't expect to be, then a moving away from what you created and/or segueing into the next section/project. Could this structure then be helpful to me in the way I would move forward? Certainly, there was a synergy: the trail is divided into four books, so I am using each book as a device to section the collection. Part I is Peacehaven to Greenwich; Part II is Greenwich to Hardwick; Part III is Hardwick to Boston; and Part IV is Boston to the Humber. Each Part will consist of approximately 20 pages of poetry, subdivided by the Ordnance Survey Map number which pertains to that part of the walk.



So far I have walked to Epping Forest and I intend to walk the rest of the route this summer. While walking, I record observations and events in real time; these appear on the page using indentations to indicate voice or breath change and emphasis. Before each walk, I do some basic research into the places *en route*, but I do not plan the content. It is very important that the poem leads me. I stop to take notes as I walk, sometimes record things into a recording app on my phone and take photographs. At the end of the day, I write up the day—and finish the section related to each walk within five days. Inevitably, I engage in “soul-wandering”, so associative leaps and

digressions are made, including sensory description, bits of narrative and lived experience, mainly relating to whatever is preoccupying me at the time, the passage of time, what I am reading around that journey, and conversations—both real and imaginary.

Part II has a section called “The First Cut”. This is composed by using the cut-up method. I took every tenth sentence from “The First Walk” in Iain Sinclair’s *Lights Out for the Territory*. I cut the sentences up into individual words and phrases, and collaged these into the poem along with my notes and observations of the day’s walk.

And this is where I am now, about to enter Epping Forest, which I’ve been putting off because of all the stories I’ve heard of the woods’ dark reputation. I wonder what will happen further ahead, through Forest and into the Fens? And Lincolnshire?

¹ If there is an application of this concept to *Meridian* it is that I am trying to break through the paternalistic and geocentric relationships inherent in the L[1]ine.

First drafted in February 2016 (at the outset of the *Meridian* project). The walk was completed in autumn 2017; this essay was published on the Longbarrow Blog on 6 March 2019.

Hardwick to Chatteris

—*And toward what dates do we write ourselves?*

Paul Celan, *Meridian*

The poem chooses December 5
the day of fracture
time & everything
is out of joint
boundaries
 borders
 places dissolve
into an in-between-ness & a no
where

See Holbein's "The Ambassadors".
Instead of viewing it straight on,
stand very close to it on the right hand
side. Only then does the oblong shape
in the bottom centre reveal itself to
be a human skull. Anamorphosis.

Today the path traces the journey in
 to landscape
not a noun but a verb
not an object to be
examined or
a text to be read but
a process marking
the trace
 of its passing

The trace defines
 withholds
 remains
after the footsteps inscribing it have passed
 drawing you backwards
 into itself

I cannot walk this way
without thinking of you

stand close to me now

Nancy Gaffield

‘Hardwick to Chatteris’ appears in Nancy Gaffield’s collection *Meridian* (Longbarrow Press, 2019).

Along a Line
Mark Goodwin



Mark on the weir rail, Birstall, Leicestershire
(photo by Elaine Miller)

I have what could be described as a penchant for balancing along things – fence rails or tree branches or cables etc. Such balancing is intensified walking. I so enjoy the precision of toe, ball-of-foot & heel placed on solidity, and feeling for friction, as the rest of my body sways in air and pulls only against its own muscles to stay placed, and connected by feet.

As a poet I have a penchant for lines, for sound-shapes & text-shapes measured out, sometimes even in feet. The metaphor of balancer precisely stepping along a rail equalling poet is no metaphor at all, nor a symbol. Humans walk, and humans balance, and humans speak.

Very near to where I live there is a country park. It has an abundance of solid lines to balance along. One of my favourite lines is made from old railway track bolted to short pillars. This single railway rail is just a foot or two above the water of the river Soar, and it was placed here as a guard, to keep boats off the weir. Just the other day an elderly couple paused on the walkway running parallel with the rail, they watched me intently as I walked backwards along the line. When I got to one of the pillars, I stood on its rectangular top and got chatting with the couple. I mentioned to them how last summer an elderly woman, probably in her mid-seventies, had watched me just as intently as they, and that when I'd finished my walk she came over to me smiling. She was delighted, and told me that she had last walked along that very rail when she was twelve years old.

When I first started balancing in the park I was a little shy, or rather I didn't want people to think I was showing off, so I would try to wait until no one was about. This was almost impossible, and so I was hardly getting any balancing done. And to grow the power of balance one has to do a lot of it. So, I decided that I must



Mark rail-balancing, Thurmaston weir, Leicestershire
(photo by Nikki Clayton)

balance whatever, whoever was about, and that part of the practice should be to ignore whoever was watching me or speaking to me whilst I was balancing, but that once done with my balancing, should someone ask me about it I should tell them as much as I could. This practice has led me into delightful, and sometimes inspiring encounters with various kinds of people, from cheeky teenagers through to a serious

but gentle Indian doctor. Most people have been inspired by my balancing and have inspired me by the ways they have questioned me.



King Lear's Lake, Watermead Park, Leicestershire
(photo by Nikki Clayton)

There have been a few incidents. Once on the railway rail by the weir a lad threw a football at me. It skimmed in front of my face. I didn't even flinch, not one teeter. My body was so focused on being in balance on the rail, that it, or was it me?, just accepted the flying object as being part of the place & the moment. I suppose sudden ducks & low-flying geese had helped in my training. In no way do I know Kung Fu! But I certainly know how Kung Fu

becomes possible. Then again, most of us can tie our shoelaces blindfold and at speed. If we really watch the dexterity of someone tying a shoelace, and detach from our habitual familiarity towards that calligraphic knotting procedure, then we see that shoelace tying is Kung Fu.

To walk along a handrail by the side of a footpath is to disobey. This is, I feel passionately, what poetry should be. Poetry is just next to the conventional ways



Mark being challenged by a young official in Watermead Park, Leicestershire (photo by Nikki Clayton)

(or habits) of being human ... but it disobeys, which only goes to show those conventions more clearly, even celebrate them ... but certainly challenge them.

I was challenged by a very young man, a very angry young man actually. He was dressed in a dark uniform, he was a park warden. I was balancing along a rail that was placed in the landscape with the intention of

keeping pedestrians & feeders of ducks & such from falling into the lake. It was never intended to be a way. But this rail has been one of my ways for some years now. As the water lapped to my right this young man barked his commands at me from my left. Part of my discipline is to ignore anyone who talks to me whilst I'm balancing. So that is what I did. I regret that this only made the young man even more angry, as he protested what he believed to be my irresponsibility. However, I would not change the way I behaved at that point. What I would change is the way I tried to reason with him afterwards, tried to get him to see that should I hurt myself, well, it would only be by my fault and I would have to be responsible for it. I think it is probably illegal for me to balance on this rail, and so my argument only served to anger further this young man in his uniform. I now feel that I should've let the young man tell me off ... and once he'd gone just carried on along my way. It's well over a year since this took place, and I've not seen the young uniformed man since.

The first time I balanced the thin white rail over the lock gate my fear was intense. Although I knew falling into the lock was unlikely to do me much harm. But the lock, its narrow slot, its dark obscure water – the lock holds a terror. The terror in the bottom of the lock is still there. It's a simple terror, and a true one – it consists of no oxygen & filthy cold wet depth. No place to live in. Over the years my balance has become so sharp that walking the thin white rail over the lock gate poised breathing above no place to live where the terror still is has become a joy. I love poetry!

First published on the Longbarrow Blog, 31 August 2016.

Balance Sings

my feet feel

the roll
of a long
beech branch

air by &

below me
my hands green
with gravity

light is

passing
through

my fingers
I sway
like a tree's

stillness
speeded
I stand

on a long
line of held
star-parts

springy wood
resounds with

the beautifully
weak force

of Earth's pull

only my feet
touch

my frame
sways free
arms divining
a star-heart's

vortex or

a deep pool
of time drying

I sway

feet planted
to bark as
roots topple
through soil's

unseen systems

I lift
a planted
foot rip
my position
and new

ly replace
a new shape

a beech stays

grace-filled

my feet feel
along a long
curved beech

limb this sway
as sweet

as saying

arememberednameneverknownbefore

Mark Goodwin

'Balance Sings' appears in Mark Goodwin's collection *Steps* (Longbarrow Press, 2014).



From *Borderlands* (2014), Karl Hurst

Further Reading

In print

Meridian (2019)

Nancy Gaffield

Rock as Gloss (2019), *Steps* (2014)

Mark Goodwin

The Grail Roads (2018), *The Purging of Spence Broughton, a Highwayman* (2009)

Rob Hindle

Skin (2015)

Chris Jones

The Footing (2013)

Angelina Ayers, James Caruth, Mark Goodwin, Rob Hindle, Andrew Hirst, Chris Jones, Fay Musselwhite

Online (click titles for links)

Meridian: The Last Step

on embodied research, the poetic journal, and the walking and writing of *Meridian*

Nancy Gaffield

The Flattening & Covering Wave

on memory and displacement in south Leicestershire

Mark Goodwin

Under the Water

on re-walking the townscapes of *Flights and Traverses*

Rob Hindle

Drawing on Walls: the Making of 'Death and the Gallant'

on pre-Reformation wall art and its attempted obliteration

Chris Jones

Cover photography: Karl Hurst

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