

Signposts

A silent walk with readings by Nickel van Duijvenboden & Marie Nerland
from Hordaland Kunstsenter to the outskirts of Gyldenpris, Bergen, Norway

Saturday, 23 June 2018, 14:00. A welcome at Hordaland Kunstsenter, Klosteret 17, in the centre of Bergen. Gentle rain and around 15°C. We gather in the bookshop of the art centre, and after giving people the occasion to use the restrooms, convene outside under a tree. We are with seven. Marie takes the word; she explains the walk will take around two hours and will end about 40 minutes from the city centre. She invites the participants to follow our tempo, reassuring them that we will adjust our pace when someone falls behind. She then proposes not to speak for the duration of the walk. This is introduced not as a strict rule but rather as a gift to one another, a shared space. The possibility that we might attract strange looks from passers-by is briefly addressed. The walk begins; Nickel leads the way as Marie stays toward the back of the group to make sure everyone can follow.

We descend and traverse a busy area with considerable speed. Soon, we climb a hill and walk across a ledge that leads to a gap in a wire fence. We climb through, lending a hand to the person behind.

1. Nickel, seated at a picnic table on top of a slope with a playing areas for children.

There is someone on the other side of the planet, distant enough to be exchanging letters with. She wrote me this:

‘Dear Nickel, have you ever thought of ghosts? ... I’m not talking about any kind of monster. I just mean some sort of voices and images, images separated from the voices.’

She added: ‘Maybe we both prefer ghosts.’

I’ve been thinking about it ever since. Had I ever thought of ghosts? It seemed like I hadn’t, but indeed, I had. I’d once jotted down a line of Kafka’s, which goes like this.

Writing letters really is a conversation with ghosts, and not just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one’s own ghost, which underhandedly evolves inside the letter one is writing, or even a series of letters – where a letter gives substance to the other and calls upon him as a witness. How did it ever enter our minds that people could converse with one another through letters!

These lines were taken from a particularly desperate flurry of letters addressed to Kafka’s lover, Milena, whom he practically never got to see. It is safe to say that their love was enacted

almost entirely in writing. Most of the letters are about the agony of not seeing each other, a mutual absence which is nevertheless curiously convenient to their correspondence, and continually perpetuated by both of them.

In a letter to someone else, Kafka confessed: 'The longing for other people turns into fear once it is fulfilled.'

This does shed a light on the distance not only presupposed, but also imposed by corresponding. Indeed, my friend brought up the subject of ghosts in reaction to this paragraph of mine:

I have come to understand that correspondences are a peculiar kind of friendship – I do consider it a friendship – that exists on the condition of distance. I've sometimes worried that it was selfish to write letters to people that I don't necessarily feel the need to see, or know intimately. On the contrary, even, it suits me just fine to miss them. I mean missing in the active sense, keeping alive the sense of a lack. (Tending the lack, cultivating it.) I do not mean getting rid of them. In your case, I'm not sure if I can even say that I know you... I just know that I'm very fond of the way you write. I know it as a voice, a presence.

An absent presence. A present absence. Isn't that what a ghost is? Something (someone) which is at once there and not there? What Kafka calls 'giving substance to the other' is like an act of conjuring. It is a kind of speaking that anticipates its receiver in such a way as to simulate him or her. Kafka was right to wonder in astonishment, 'How did it ever enter our minds that people could converse with *one another* through letters!' People converse with themselves through letters, that part of themselves which is inhabited by the other. After all, what distinguishes a correspondence from a dialogue is the fact that the person writing doesn't get interrupted. A letter necessarily has the quality of a soliloquy. If anything, letters are a simulated dialogue, a dialogue with the other who inhabits, lives inside, one's own body.

I once spoke to someone about the activity of exchanging letters as a means of measuring distance. There's the distance implied by posting a piece of mail, the amount of time it takes, the stamps and traces and creases it collects along the way; in other words, the physical distance. But there is also the distance of minds, which may in fact be so aligned as to cancel any physical distance. Letters trace the incompatibility of thought. This is all about the question, to what extent do you and I differ – are we 'of one mind'? – but also to what extent the you that I am conjuring in my writing differs from the real you, and in what sense the

writer of the letters is of a piece with me. It is perhaps in this sense that exchanging letters is like a conversation with ghosts.

2. Marie standing under a street lantern with some trees as a backdrop.

We walk in the city where I have lived most of my life and you have only been a few days. So many places here are filled with memories for me. I had a friend who used to live in a house we just passed by. I stood waiting for someone at the corner over there.

And how many times have I walked this particular street? Moving quickly to get where I was going, barely noticing my surroundings. Or wandering around, all those random walks, projecting onto the street whatever was filled inside of me: joy, loneliness, worries, the pressure of work, of life and being.

I remember a writer saying to me how he likes to live here, it is the best place for him to write, here in this city where the rain fills the streets with melancholy.

I'm wondering if you see a place better from distance. Do you have to live somewhere to really see a place and get the feel of a place? Our lives are so much about coming, going, leaving, returning. Maybe it is when you arrive for the first time that you see a place. You got up early in the morning and took the map with you and walked alone on the path to Løvstakken.

One time I wrote a text message to a boy if he wanted to come with me for a walk to try to find the most beautiful street light here in the city. We walked, it was winter, it was cold, we walked for hours, we found the lamp, we fell in love.

We move through an area with lots of traffic, funneling onto the bridge to the other side of the fjord. Underneath the bridge is a gritty area with garages and skate ramps. Nickel brings out a soprano glockenspiel and plays the melodic line of Irrlicht: a song about straying from Schubert's Winterreise cycle. The tones pierce through the city noise.

3. Nickel in the courtyard between two modern apartment complexes with a view on the water. Marie hands out chunks of dark chocolate.

It was just after dawn when he pulled over next to the road. It was all prepared. He could get out of the car and start walking without delay. Small signposts, knee-high and easy to miss, were the only indication of a long-distance trail intersecting the main road. The trail, slightly

sunken and just wide enough to place one foot in front of the other, cut across private land in both directions, as though it was only ever used by ranchers. In fact, it was likely used by them, if only within the perimeter of their respective properties. All the others were merely passersby: strangers with heavy loads, temporarily exercising their right of way as they trekked from one national boundary to the other, across more than 2,500 miles.

He cautiously pressed the metal entry fence. It fell shut by itself, like the ones he knew from day trips to the dunes and dykes back home. Concealed under a bush, out of sight from the road, was a water cache: stacks of one-gallon jugs in boxes that had been torn open by hikers. Some jugs lay about in the full sun. He knew the label from the local supermarket. Someone had inscribed the necks in permanent marker with a date, long-past, along with a nearly illegible tag: PCT HIKERS.

Long-distance walkers. In this area, they fell into two categories that needed to be kept apart. For illegal immigrants, the word AGUA was enough information, and even without its reassurance they would presumably risk sipping from an oil drum. Modern pilgrims had their own concealed stash adorned with their own label. He didn't rule out the possibility that the volunteers who installed water caches along hiking trails, were the same people restocking barrels for the displaced.

He considered himself part of neither category. He hadn't brought more than a small backpack, sagging with the water he had siphoned from his own supply. It was simple: he would go on walking until he'd depleted either half his reservoir or half his strength, and head back the same way. No other boundaries applied to him. He was free to wear himself down completely.

The first part ran parallel to the road. His breathing was deep and regular. The daily hiking had improved his shape. The blisters on his heels didn't bother him anymore. After some time, the path curved onto the plain. He continued along a rusted barbed-wire fence, facing a barren mountainside, the trail an ancient template. Cacti sprang up from the ground here and there – he was by now able to name each.

When the fence stopped, his last point of reference fell away. There was no way of telling if he would start the ascent within minutes or after an hour. Each step prolonged the distance lying ahead. That sense of deferral was intoxicating. Time was condensed, as if a single frame of film had become stuck in the projector without breaking the illusion of motion. This sensation went beyond one's exact whereabouts and the act of lifting one's feet. It was as though all walks one had ever made were compressed into one walk, this walk. And this happened every time.

Two fighter jets came over low. They moved at an anomalous velocity, as though he were occupying some seriously slowed-down state that became apparent to him only now.

So far, he'd striven to record each trek in writing. But hiking was a long, sustained experience that intrinsically defied description. There was something about the perception of

time that he wasn't able to encapsulate. Only the things that stood out in one way or another allowed themselves to be rendered in writing. Military flyovers, the pawmarks of a kit fox, stones that appeared to have been left there long ago – such encounters could be committed to paper. Ultimately, though, they weren't what the walk was about. More than anything else, it was comprised of a certain tedium, a lack of emphasis.

[...]

He could somehow tell this was a long-distance trail. Its advance was more capricious and steeper than he was used to; the vistas were more drawn-out and the plant life less diverse. Its contrasts and drama probably revealed themselves only over longer periods of time, in the gradual transitions from one type of desert to the next, and later, to sequoia forest, alpine landscapes and volcanic regions in the north. It was a timescale that he imagined suited him better than these daily bursts. The distance to the destination was such an abstract figure that it would be pointless to constantly have it in mind as a goal. That seemed liberating. It was a mystery to him why so many people, not least nonbelievers, got so fixated on traditional places of pilgrimage, when one could just as well walk without any particular objective – the next water cache, say.

We pass a small beach, hemmed in by concrete ramps. We trace its U-shape as well as the waterline. It feels like a place to linger, so we slacken our pace. Then we take the pedestrian bridge to the other side and again, spend some time to listen before taking the steep stairs uphill.

4. Marie in a quiet residential back street, close to a miscellaneous grid of private mailboxes.

Dear Nickel,

I was staying at a bed and breakfast with red painted walls. In my room there was an old hourglass, made of dark wood, the sand inside was in a warm pink color. I turned the glass and watched the sand slowly pile up and then I turned it again. In the room there was an old clock that wasn't working, the time was 9.51. It was written behind the clock arms, barely readable: Parfums de Fleurs, Paris.

In the book shelf there were a few leftover books from previous guests, with titles like: The power of focus, The tipping point, It happened four years ago.

An old globe lamp, where the oceans were black and the countries were in an orange glow with worn out, almost unreadable letters, it was beautiful though. Turning it slowly around, maybe that is the best way of travelling, to sit at night as a child and watch the lamp-version of

the globe and look at the different countries, oceans and cities. How it is all divided into borders, sections, meridians and time zones.

The room was filled with the strangest artefacts, and last night I had such chaotic dreams. I have been in a car accident on the highway, I thought I wanted to write to you about the accident. It was a shocking experience, I was inside a car and we were standing still, and then a car ran into us, the driver had been writing a text message on his cell phone and he didn't notice that the cars in front of him were standing still and he drove into the car.

Fortunately, he had low speed, I think part of the shock of it afterwards was the thought of what if he had driven in a higher speed and what could have happened then. How fragile we as humans are, how vulnerable, and the enormous forces that are in the machines that surrounds us, in the cars. And the distractions of all the drivers that just now are on their phones while driving.

The other scary thing was to stand there while the cars were driving so fast all around us. I was afraid other cars would hit into us or hit the driver that went out on the highway to talk with the driver behind us. After arriving here, I just lay for a long time on the bed resting. How fast it all happened. How fast an accident happens.

I have never been in accidents before. The sound of the crash. The metal of the cars breaking. I wanted to write to you about the old hourglass and the accident. I wanted to write to you about the notion of time.

5. Nickel on a grassy bend, a shortcut between two streets.

Measuring distance. If I go back a bit further, there's an earlier, more casual mention of ghosts in my writing. Years ago, I was working on a novel about someone who resembles me in many respects, but who, in a fundamental distancing, isn't me. He's travelling alone through the deserts of the Southwest. Daily hikes make up the framework of the novel. It is a classic narrative of a person trying to find himself, yet 'self' is perhaps what he has too much of, and so the walks could be understood as repeated attempts to achieve a loss of self, a dissolution of self.

Then there is the issue of speed. Walking may be associated with slowness, an adaptation to a slower pace, and in that sense, an escape from the speed of technology, the haste of our daily lives, the urban rush. But the protagonist of my book handles walking in quite a different way.

When he walks, or, quite similarly, when he cycles, he continuously pushes his own boundaries, either by cranking up his speed or by going too far. It is a deaf kind of walking, ignoring all signals, it is a walking as chase.

His chase is imaginary, of course. Or is it? What or who does he chase? By what or by whom is he being chased? At some point, early in the book, we observe him racing up a steep mountain, and on the way back down, there's this passage:

At the fork, he looked down. His car was where he'd left it, glimmering in the blaze. His shirt clung to his back. For the entire way, he'd seen someone walking ahead of him, a man his age, also alone. Though he'd rushed down relentlessly, he hadn't managed to close in on him. From high up, he watched him enter his car and drive off – his own specter, always slightly ahead.

The same might be true of the walks I have made here in Bergen these last days, especially during the early morning. Being in nature ought to be an overwhelming experience, yet it feels secondary to the desire to get ahead of oneself at all costs, to get out of bed earlier than the body is able to process, to walk a steep path at a higher rate than the heart permits, to descend in a manner that verges on falling. I guess I haven't learned, haven't gained on the protagonist of my book in any significant way.

6. Marie by another hotchpotch of mailboxes, overlooking the city.

Rebecca Solnit writes in her book *Wanderlust* that walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord. That the mind is a landscape as such – and walking is one way to traverse it. She has this theory that the mind works like the feet, in about three miles an hour. And how we live in an age characterized by the rapid and efficient.

I liked so much what you wrote to me:

In the opening paragraph of your letter, you speak about a chronic sense of behindness. You wonder if it has to do with the nature of art projects. I think it is more existential. A reassurance: you'll always feel behind. That's because what seems to lie ahead is not reachable, it is there to haunt us and project a sense of loss. A future lost.

In the book *Ghosts of My Life*, Mark Fisher writes about the concept of hauntology. Fisher relates it to popular culture and contemporary art, arguing that our generation is yearning

for futures that failed to happen. We are restlessly envisioning these futures, sensing a drift towards them, and yet we lack the means to invent and sustain them. I find this very recognizable.

It's as if we are reaching back into the past to find these unrealized futures. Similarly, the widespread use of outdated, analogue, retrograde techniques and styles constitutes a form of defiance, a way out of a present that does not seem to go anywhere. Writing and mailing letters, this antiquated form of communication, fits this template. So, perhaps, does the desire to walk, with all its implications of slowness, withdrawal and independence from technology.

7. Nickel in the rear gallery of a slightly run-down apartment complex, one of the final rows of houses on these slopes. He sounds the glockenspiel once more to test the acoustics.

Over the years, I've stayed in touch with a tutor of mine, an accomplished writer, and once I let him read a draft version of my uncompleted book. His comment was: 'You're halfway there. You've got the entire journey on paper. Now, of course, you need to make the same journey here, in your head.' In terms of writing, he implied, I had merely put on my hiking boots.

As I mentioned, the book is uncompleted, as opposed to incomplete. Incomplete means 'not finished'; part is missing, it lacks closure. Uncompleted, on the other hand, suggests something slightly more definitive: an abandonment, it will never be finished, never returned to. It was – past participle – *uncompleted* – as though it was complete to begin with, and progressively made less complete. A bit like 'undone'. There was a book, I began writing, and as I generated more and more text, the book came apart. Maybe that's what it means to write a book.

I now think there is a sense of mourning about never having finished it. I feel haunted by this project in the same way as the main character is being haunted by other types of mourning. Especially when I burrow into the husk of that relentless walker again. Some philosophers call mourning a work: the 'work of mourning'. Some even go so far as to say that this work, when it goes wrong, can become an embodiment of the loss. The person, or thing, that was lost, or better yet, stays unrealized, inhabits a part of your body and its unconscious starts feeding into your speech. A private hauntology.

During a recent cycling trip with my a writer friend of mine, we discussed why I had abandoned my book. We ended up talking not about the walks that I'd described, but about the unwritten chapters in between. 'So why did you go into the desert and made these solitary

walks?’ my friend asked, undeniably a central question to the book, which I nevertheless couldn’t answer. It corresponds with the feeling of hindsight, the act of looking back, reflecting on past occurrences with a semblance of knowledge. Your frightening paragraphs about the car accident are an uncanny reminder of this effect: what I find most unsettling about them is the lack of distance between the experience and its description. The acute sense of chaos still suffuses those lines, it is unprocessed in a way, but the fact that you chose not to share this vital story with me during our first days here, instead opting to write about it, indicates that the distancing necessary to make it into a narrative had already presented itself.

8. Nickel, seated on a picnic table along a hiking trail with a wide perspective of the city.

A drawing artist for whom I’ve occasionally done some ghostwriting – one of the most gratifying activities I can think of, by the way – once remarked in a work diary that some landscapes allow themselves to be ‘read’. She meant it chiefly in a scientific sense: she was working closely together with avalanche and tree experts, who taught her how to discern patterns in Alpine forests, which could reveal previous avalanche pathways and glacier retreat. Bearing this in mind, however, drawing a scene from nature becomes like writing, like a scribe’s reproductive activity.

To me, this dimension of landscape is always near when moving through it by foot or by bike. I also once likened it to being the stylus of a gramophone, brought into vibration by the grooves it moves through, somehow channeling and deciphering some relief into something audible in stereo, or better yet, in surround, with that exception that the landscape isn’t spinning beneath you toward some central, mute point, but rather, that *you* are moving through the landscape till you’ve reached a stillness within – that is, till you’ve lost your abilities as an amplification system.

Walking and cycling for me are deeply intertwined with singing. Movement as such is. Last week I joined a singing class for the first time in a while, and one of my new classmates remarked that she sometimes overhears people singing on their bicycles in Amsterdam. According to her, lots of people did it. She sometimes chimes in if she knows the song, she said, startling the other person.

Was vermeid ich denn die Wege wo die andern Wanderer gehn
Suche mir versteckte Stege durch verschneite Felsenhöhn...

In my experience, too few cyclists sing. I do it all the time, to the point that my six-year-old son, who's on a small saddle in front of me when I bring him to school and back, has gotten familiar with the lyrics to some Schubert songs. (He understands German.)

Habe ja doch nichts begangen, das ich Menschen sollte scheun
Das ich Menschen sollte scheun

He playfully mimics the exaggerated sound and look of a classical baritone, poking fun at me.

Welch ein törichtes Verlangen treibt mich in die Wüsteneien
Treibt mich in die Wüstenein...

Seriously though, there is an elemental relationship between walking and singing, between the bouncing of one's strides, the rhythm of one's breathing, and the openness of the landscape on the one hand, and on the other hand the cadance of a tune, the fluid pitch of the exhalation, the acoustics of a plain. A bit less obvious, perhaps, is the flow of diction, the unfolding of a literature, that corresponds with the continual advance in walking.

— That's how my singing teacher called it this morning: *literature*. She didn't refer to books, to reading or to study; she used the word merely to address any sound we as singers produced that went beyond 'o-u-o' and 'o-a-o'. The way she phrased it was: 'You're going to tear up your notes once you bring in your literature, right? We always do.'

Her offhand use of the word literature reminded me that a song is also an internalized narrative – a rarity in today's world, where texts are so seldom committed to memory – an extended unit of language that covers a certain distance – not only that, it connects points along a route. In other words, the song can be an alternative way of measuring a given landscape. The song as distance, the distance as song. Singing as spacing.

Marie on the same location.

My father used to go for long walks almost every day, and then because of his health getting worse his radius of walking has over the last years been shrinking and shrinking, now he barely can walk maybe two hundred meters, but he does it, every day he leaves the house and go for a walk, on the road above the house where I grew up, the house is in a forest and the road he walks is the road that goes up to the mountains. And there he walks, but just very short, just the beginning of the road.

He enjoys his short walks, still the freedom to go for a walk, with his body so much burdened with arthritis, stiffness and pain. I asked him: Don't you miss going for long walks, and he said to me, there is so much I miss. I think he has this ability that maybe is a gift, to value what is now. My father choses to think of what he is able to do now and not on what he no longer can do.

In a short week I go to Norway and to my father, maybe that is why he came to my mind while writing on walking. The walking, that we so much take for granted, how it needs our bodies being able to do it.

To walk, to move through a landscape, through a city, through a text.

The walk ends. Our company stays together and walks back to the pedestrian bridge via another route. There, we enter a café and resume our conversation. The participants agree that they really appreciated the different perspective of their city and admit they had never walked this route before. Some know the city like the plam of their hand, yet they encountered new sites. They share their enthusiasm about not knowing our destination, which had them speculating at first, then gradually letting it go and allowing the words to reverberate in their minds. The most striking feature of the walk, everybody agrees, is the paradoxical sense of having been in a long communication, when in fact there had been no talking. The conversation at the café is merely a continuation of this dialogue.

In a later e-mail, Mathijs van Geest (director of the Hordaland Kunstsenter) reflected on the walk by addressing an awkwardness in the transition from walking in silence to speaking. This awkwardness wasn't necessarily a bad thing, he argued. Rather, it could be used for effect: by walking and speaking at the same time, for example, in keeping with the lines about singing on the bike and catching only a part. In light of this, he really liked the chimes of the glockenspiel as they accentuated a rhythmic and spatial dimension of walking. For him, it worked especially well to read in more nondescript areas, since elsewhere there was a risk of the location being too emphatic or exposed. The readings became more intertwined as we moved up, which he considered an added quality. Mathijs also mailed a copy of an essay by Walid Sadek: 'Mourning in the Presence of a Corpse', tying in with the implication of mourning.