

IKON

Six Lockdown Walks



Artist John Newling and writer Alys Fowler exchange letters on their daily walks, through residential areas and open spaces in Nottingham and Birmingham. Reflecting on the pattern language of these environs and their own behaviours, some happy accidents and moments of connection occur.

Letter: 3/6

From: John Newling

Date: Friday 17 April

Time: 2pm

Weather: Sunny with a gentle breeze

Subject: Between a chalked sign and a tree that hugs itself

Dear Alys,

It's the daily walk. Compliance is a strange thing. I heard this morning that it will take 66 days for us to accept the new conditions and, indeed, to get a bit grumpy when the new conditions are changed. Not sure where that comes from, but odd all the same. We are currently drowning in snippets of data. I can still feel the stinging of my hands from last night's clapping; that's three so far, another six and we will be close to resenting the end of lockdown.

Right or left at the gate. I go right. I pass our next-door neighbours' house and glance up at the flag flying from the pole they have installed. Our neighbours are smashing people and very creative. Amongst many things they have a huge collection of flags, from smiley faces to national emblems. I am not a fan of places flying the St George or Union Jack. They give me the creeps and I find myself making all kinds of assumptions about the place and its occupants.

No, our neighbours' flags can change daily, tuning our small community into the rest of the world. I love the flags as they remind us of other stories and places whilst being remote from the relentlessness of our news media; a kind of community journalism. At the moment in the porch of the same household there are two white boards with short bursts of text, information on the flag they are flying, facts of the day and jokes; brilliant.



The spring awakening seems to be racing towards teatime as the blossoms are now bedecking the pavements and most trees have that sublime haze of green that mists the landscape. There is a moment when spring finishes and summer sets in. I always find this a slightly sad time, but we are not there yet. It is so hard to reconcile these quiet, empty and beautiful streets with the truth that we walk them in the company of a pandemic.

I cross the road.

Walking in the city, I notice how each house has its own kind of semaphore. Windows often hold objects facing outwards to the street. This stuff is lovely to see and encourages our curiosity, allowing us to admire and conjecture on the interests, desires and hopes of others. I read that at different times we have objects on the sill facing into the home or out onto the street. In this time of lockdown our streets have become places of solidarity and support; objects and signs greet the passer-by. Perhaps our fears of touching are slightly assuaged by these other forms of expression.

On one side of a street I count: 15 hand-drawn rainbows, 9 large candles, 5 teddy bears, 3 telephone numbers offering help to people in isolation, a display of ceramic pigs in a variety of poses, a bundle of Indian scarves, an old election poster, ceramic ballerinas and so much more. It's an anthropologist's dream.

After a while I come across a pavement chalked with images of Easter bunnies, rainbows and flowers. It hasn't rained much recently so the chalk is still there. The drawings are exuberant even celebratory, drawn with large chalks by children with big hearts. I stop to look at these marks of a moment passed and left to wash away at some point in time.

Then, set aside from the colourful display, I see a very different bit of work. Drawn in white chalk on asphalt it says "lock down love". Below each of the words is a drawing of a padlock, a downward pointing arrow and a heart. Not sure if it was drawn at the same time as the other chalked works, but I find it singularly moving. It is unsure and fragile in its execution. The lightness of the chalk suggests the author wants it to wash away quicker than the adjacent bunnies, rainbows and flowers. I think it has been drawn by an adult, possibly a parent of the children. It does feel like a work that was strongly felt and needed to be done by whoever did it. I can feel the resigned sigh of the person as the simple action is finished; nobody knows the true psychological consequences of this pandemic.



On every walk I get a small jolt of joy from seeing children with weary looking adults. These small tribes exude care and fun in equal measures. Goodness knows what the adults are thinking, but they display no sign of anxiety to the children. I love them for that.

I walk the length of the street, take a short left, then a right and another right. I am now in an area that I haven't walked in for a while, but vaguely recognise the street. The houses are larger than the others I have been passing, although not set back too far from the pavement. The street trees are huge and stunning.

I recall this is where I saw a tree that seemed to be hugging itself. I have come across this tree on other walks, but am now a bit hazy on where it is and, indeed, whether I have mythologised it. I do know roughly the area and it is a very large street tree. After a few

wrong choices I get a sense that this may be the street. I think it is the tree I am walking towards, but it isn't. It is the next tree that is the one with its extraordinary root wrapping itself around its base. This is the tree. It feels like the walk had a destination and this is it.

I spend some time looking at the tree; circling its trunk and touching its bark. The combination of the chalked Covid-19 drawing and this magnificent tree sends a wave of sadness through me. It is the same kind of resigned sigh I sensed when looking at the chalked work.



I head for home at a faster pace not really looking at anything.

This is a time when an old soldier walks around his house with his new hip and medals, raising millions for our NHS. The old soldier is a good and decent man with only the best of intentions. He has become a diversion from all our fears; a shield of sorts. I cannot help but think political advisers must be clapping his every lap. Meanwhile in some city, town or village that is somewhere and everywhere, a person struggles to sleep because they cannot feed themselves or their family

I get home, wash my hands, give Ann a hug and put the kettle on.