

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: 2/6

From: Alys Fowler

Date: Monday 9 April

Time: 4pm

Weather: Sunny, warm, light breeze

Subject: A walk with no distance

Dear John,

I can go forward or I can go right. If I go left, I hit the railroad. If I go forward, I head towards to the shops, to people and commerce. I consider this the other world. If I go right, I enter my world. I take three more rights until I dip under the railway bridge and scramble up into the park, to snake between the poplars and the emerging cow parsley, to count the cowslips (just one this year) and watch the buttercups wake up. Then through to the little

wood, saying hello to the wood anemones, curving past the fallen tree where the slime mould lives, checking in on the oyster mushrooms that are now wilted snotty handkerchiefs of their former selves. Then a little further on, past the pond and the great beech (not yet in leaf, unlike your hedge) to the allotment gate and my destination.



I do this walk nearly every day. It is mapped on my heart and that of the dog's too. She is fond of certain spots the way dogs are. She likes to idle by the pond, knowing full well that I want to get behind the gate as quickly as possible and, playing on my frustration, will get offered a treat to hurry up. She has a mighty will for a small being.

About a year ago she decided it was beneath her to be tethered any longer. She knows the route and the routine; the lead is a ruse she no longer wishes to partake in. If you put it on her she goes so painfully slow, digging her heels in as you try to chivy her along. If you take it off, she trots along with an air of purpose and pride that makes me feel guilty that I ever thought it was necessary.

Today, I go right with the dog, and with Ele, who's just graduated early from med school and has Easter off before she is drafted to a local hospital. We have a basket full of mixed corn for the hens and seeds for the soil. Up we scramble to romp through the main field so the dog can gallop and we can look at the clouds and the crows. Then into the little woodland where on the path we meet something unexpected; a very unusual looking pigeon.

We used to keep white tumbling doves when I was a child. Occasionally, one of the females would get swayed by a feral pigeon and we'd get these piebald babies that never knew their father, but carried a wild freedom inside them. They would improvise on the loop to loop of their flight pattern or just become curious and go see the wider world.

The pigeon on the path looked a little like them, black, white and grey with a pretty little head and the tell-tale ring on her ankle. She was a lost homing pigeon.

Ele and the dog stay back and I sit down with some of the chicken corn, doing my very best to persuade the pigeon to come live with us. She comes closer, then darts back, gobbles up corn and looks at me curiously. I send Ele and the dog down a different path so that they can come up slowly behind and edge her towards a life with us. Just as I think it might actually happen, the dog does a very dramatic sneeze and she flies up into the branches, refusing to come down for any amount of corn. The dog looks away: I've thought about this since and I am quite sure it was timed on her part.

For a good hour, I mourn not having that pigeon as a friend. I look for her the next day, but she is nowhere. I hope that, refuelled on my chicken corn, she has gone home. That or she met another pigeon and now is living a wild life along the rail tracks.

I'm very interested in pigeons. I am fascinated in how they transcend so many different spaces for us. They are feral and domesticated, prized, fattened (a fancy pigeon eats a very refined diet) and despised. They have raced, travelled over boundaries as spies carrying messages, won medals at fairs for their plumage, been food for working families, a source of manure, psychological test subjects and even taught to recognise breast cancer. They can apparently spot it as accurately as any oncologist.

Meeting the pigeon sent me back to reread the multispecies feminist writer Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). Do you know it? It is about how we must find new way ways to reconfigure our relationship to the earth and its inhabitants in the midst of spiralling ecological devastation. She writes of pigeons;

"Everywhere they go, these cosmopolitical pigeons occupy cities with gusto, where they incite human love and hatred in equal measures. Called 'rats with wings' feral pigeons are subject of vituperation and extermination, but they also become cherished opportunistic companions who are fed and watched avidly the world over."

Haraway is interested in species that are boundary crossers for us: occupying more than one place in our minds and thus are able to cross over and create threads of stories of how we, as multispecies, as kin, might get on better together.

That pigeon was a reminder of how I want the pretty, shy-headed one with a fine patterning to her wing, but not the cocky fat one that walks my garden daily looking for cabbages. Another hierarchy to ponder on these walks.

All this suggests that I have not been thinking of people, of hugs, of friendships and greetings, of meetings and partings. I have, I have! Perhaps too much, so that when offered a fleeting fantasy of a friendship with a pigeon, something I could hold, something that might be sent off and would return home. Well I ran away with it for a while, much to Ele's amusement;

"Are you looking for your pigeon friend?"

"Always."

I look forward to reading your next walk. I miss Nottingham, its hills and higgledy-piggledy streets.

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