

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: 4/6

From: Alys Fowler

Date: Tuesday 21 April

Time: 4pm

Weather: Sunny

Subject: A daily routine: a walk to feed the chickens

Dear John,

A few days ago, I ran into friends walking their dog and we shouted at each other from opposite sides of the street. Michael hollered;

"I woke up, opened the curtains to another bloody sunny day and concluded that it really is Groundhog Day!"

I nodded wildly in agreement.

I didn't really think this one through: one walk a day and I have to feed the chickens. So it's the same walk again and again and again. Plus, work dictates at the moment that it's always in the afternoon. This makes me all the more grateful for your walks, at least I can read of different vistas! I love the hugging tree. I have a similar tree on my walk, except this one wears its heart on its sleeve. I've attached a picture.



Anyway, today the dog really wants this walk, just not with me it turns out. I think she's pissed that Ele hasn't come along too. She dawdles, drags her feet and stubbornly refuses to come from the middle of the field until I offer up a whole pocket of treats. I swear that dog can count treats from 200 yards away. You have to make this elaborate gesture of taking out even bigger handfuls from your pocket until she is satisfied, at which point she races towards you. This routine continues all the way through the wood until I run out of patience and in a fit of irritation put her on the lead.

When we get to the allotment she hides at the bottom and then refuses to acknowledge me until she eventually appears at the shed sheepishly, demanding a jumper to sit on (she won't sit on a chair without soft furnishings).

All the while I was battling with the shed lock. I recently replaced it, but it's a cheap, flimsy thing. I find nothing more frustrating than that lock-key twitch as you try to ease it free. I end up in another fit hitting the lock repeatedly with a comedy-sized wooden hammer, which has very little effect. I send Ele a dramatic text telling her that everything is rubbish, the lock has bust and to top it off the dog hates me.

I go to weed because, in my experience, weeding is the equivalent to walking off a problem, but maybe better as you get to physically and metaphorically extract the issue. I remove

great tangles of ground elder root, yank out dandelions and docks, tear at wood avens and creeping buttercups until I have a satisfying mound for the compost heap and space to plant my wedding flowers.

We are supposed to be getting married in June. This, I conclude, is the nub of the problem. No weddings in lockdown, just lots of weeding instead. My rational side is quite at peace with having to postpone. It will happen, just not this summer it seems. In light of everything, I have my love, we have a house, a funny dog and two spirited chickens. We have our health. But my irrational side is more childish and desperately wants to dance with other people, fling flowers into the canal and toast future paddling adventures.

In place of the weeds, I planted out the calendula that were destined for the wedding. I nestle them in under the exuberant blossom of the step-over apple trees and take in the quiet of the place. The cool damp earth lowers my pulse and I hear the robin call at the sight of the weeds. The small child inside me settles down.

Gardening is all about placing faith in the future; you plant out tiny seedlings, remove weeds, nurture and tend. Planting things you may never even see grow big in your lifetime. It is not hope that drives this gesture. Hope is too often attached to wishful thinking that things might just miraculously change, which is hand in hand with denial in some ways. It is not even understanding the whirl of sunlight, water, oxygen, the wonder of chlorophyll or the magic the roots draw up to make the plant grow. I think it might be something much older, something hidden in our DNA. Anyway the joy of it all is that it happens as long as we keep spinning round that great star.

Then Ele suddenly appears on her bike with WD40 and a very impressive lock that she tells me she kept from her squatting days. This funny young doctor who started off at art school sculpting metal, now off to begin a career at the strangest of times.

We feed the chickens and wander home in the late slanting sun that turns all those new green leaves into neon dancers, catching the cow parsley in full bloom and bursting the first of the buttercups into welcome.