

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: 5/6

From: John Newling

Date: Friday 1 May

Time: 11.15am

Weather: Occasional sunshine, windy and showery

Subject: A walk at distance: languages

Dear Alys,

Beneath the street tree outside our gate is an area of soil that I dug over in 2010. It was exciting to dig in this place; not a garden or an allotment, but a kind of non-place. I love digging. It has something to do with cutting through our cultural surfaces, in this instance old tarmac and pavement detritus, to find what is below. It is a kind of discovery, where you see what has always been beneath our feet, albeit forgotten.

The original plants I put into the zone have long gone, however, many more have appeared. Some have been planted by friends and others have just blown in. I like the thought that the root zone acts as a catchment for seeds whirling in the wind, on our feet, fur and paws. I have often wondered at the ways in which plants grow through the pavements and walls of our streets.

I cross the road to another site of digging.

In 2016, I planted a birch tree in an empty root zone. Every spring I give it a good feed. I hope this helps the tree. In truth, I think it helps me even more.

The wind makes a distinct sound when the leaves on the tree are young. Much truth has been said about our renewed hearing of bird song. Today the silver birch is singing in the wind. It sounds like a soft sea meeting the shore in a liminal hour; always welcome here in the Midlands. It has rained and the greenness of everything seems intense, as though varnished. The streets are full of fallen blossoms. In many gardens the blue hues of early spring are changing to pale yellows, mauves and dense pinks. Oranges and deep reds are only days away.

I turn left at the end of the road.

Our occupation of the streets is in full swing. The pavement is decked with chalked games and instructions. One asks me to spin three times, jump as high as possible, hop for four metres, star jump ten times and so on; a new variant of hopscotch created by children and adults alike. Further down this street I notice several homes have put boxes of books onto the pavement; a library coming out of the community.

This morning I seem to be seeing more of our neighbours and friends. They all look well, even serene, calm at least, little changed by these few weeks. It's our hair that seems to be taking a hit, not just growth but colour as well.

I wonder if our daily walks have consolidated our sense of place. Not just the architecture, of roads and homes, but the people that make a place. Before lockdown, many people walking the streets during the daytime were of a certain demographic; retired and elderly. Now our streets are occupied by a much broader population. I feel optimistic that this knowing "where we are" will nudge us towards thinking locally and better connecting to our environment. Landscapes are never fixed, rather they change all the time. I do enjoy the languages that come to mind on these walks.

I stop to look at a trench cut into a tarmac drive. I always enjoy looking at these cuts through the street fabric. The thin layer of tarmac and concrete soon breaks away to soil, roots and conduits carrying I do not know what. What gets me every time is the depth of the covering we make. It's as fragile as are we.

Then I witness another kind of thinness; a crust that is breaking right now.

Across the road is a Co-op. I notice the distance between people in the queue has increased to approximately four metres. Is this a sign of our growing fear? A security woman at the door is patiently allowing people into the shop. A young man shouts abuse at her. It's nasty. The woman shouts back at him. Those in the queue do not come to the aid of the woman. Are they fearful of contact? In the end the man barges into the shop and those in the queue take pains to reassure the security women. She is upset. The veneers are wearing thin.



I glance back at the trench. The browns, oranges and tinges of yellow in the soil have such a deep and complex language. The broken roots are the same. It's difficult not to compare this with the language used outside the Co-op.

I turn left and zigzag through several streets. I am heading for a favourite place, a patch of woodland.

It is part of a local park, which is hardly ever visited. I spent some time in this place in the autumn and winter of last year. I collected sticks and marvelled at the few bits of language I could translate from its floor. I now observe all manner of plants growing from a two metres patch; I hardly recognise it from a few months ago. Landscapes change.

I am reminded of a visit to another wood, on a farm south west of Aberdeen, with Lorna Dawson, Head of the Soil Forensics Group in the Environmental and Biochemical Sciences at the James Hutton Institute.

Walking through the woods, Lorna described the method of reading a landscape known as winthroping. Anyone looking to hide something in unfamiliar territory will follow certain contours of the land and pick out distinctive reference points. Police, searching for hidden bodies or drugs, have used this technique to read landscapes in a manner very different to the rest of us.

In one case, a stash of drugs had been found buried in woodland. Police had had taken samples of soil from the boots and spade of a suspect. Lorna was asked if she could evidence a link. Soil contains microbes. These microbes are vast in number, with as many as billions in a gram of soil. What Lorna did was to use microbial DNA to solve the case. In this short text it is hard to make clear what a feat of detective work this was. The police were reading the landscape and Lorna was reading the very soil.

At the institute I saw, under huge magnification, human induced carbon in the soil. I cannot pretend that I understood all I saw, however I knew what I was hearing and seeing was a new language. Lorna can read messages from our soils; quite extraordinary, a language of us in our environment; a very special kind of translation.

My point is that, on all our walks we pick up materials, from our treading and brushing, which provide traces of where we have been. Unbeknown to us, we are seeding places all the time. This is a remarkable distribution of languages that we are only now beginning to translate.

I get back to our front gate.

My shoes are covered in the fallen blossoms and soil from the wood. I wipe them clean on the door mat. The mat has become a book of other languages.

I take my shoes off, wash my hands and put the kettle on.

