



I come out early

by *Kathy Nelson*

the sun one thumb's length
above the farthest trees,
to walk the morning road, the soft dirt tracked
by heavy tires, shaded by the fringed mimosas,
maples, poplars, others
whose names have slipped away,

and sunlit stones have long shadows,
and Queen Anne's lace leans along the fence,
and a robin drops down,
sudden raptor to a rattling June bug,
and in the field hay bales bask beside
the baler, quiet now, and in another,

six black cows dip their heavy heads
into deep grass, chewing, lashing their tails,
and from the house next to the field a rooster
calls out clear and high, and trellised vines
climb like lines of new recruits over the hill.
I've come out to find my bearings.

Let me say it another way: I am
the child of ones who walked a road like this,
and even though their road was dust

and their trees were scrub cedars,
their flowers thistles, nettles,
cattails on the river, and hawks ravaged

hapless squirrels, and red cows scabbled
among burr-grass, and even though
they walked along their road to harvest
cotton fields that promised bleeding hands
and aching backs, still it is their road
I walk, looking for landmarks, signposts.

Birds singing

by *Jack Kerouac*

Birds singing
in the dark
—Rainy dawn.

One flower

by *Jack Kerouac*

One flower
on the cliffside
Nodding at the canyon

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Places Between Bus Stops

The Restorative Power of Unlikely Walks

by Karl Meyer



“I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness.” Rebecca Solnit

Countless studies tout the benefits of walking: balance, creativity, emotional stability, physical health. Walking also offers revelation, the possibility of discovering new places. But it is the fact that my footsteps touch upon the stories of others and ground me on the planet that matters most. I get to see and listen in earth time. And the best days can be charmingly, exotically freeing for a quiet plodder such as myself, sniffing around old towns and rarely trammled places. Padding along in a minimal carbon footprint, I find that past and present sometimes merge in moments that are downright exquisite.

I was deep in thought on a recent walk when an SUV pulled up and the driver leaned out and asked if I would like a ride. This was Herb who'd repaired my computer a few times when I lived up this way. I'd just crossed into Shelburne Falls on a walk along the Deerfield from East Charlemont through parts of Buckland. "No thanks," I said, "but thanks for asking."

"But you're limping," he noted, a bit concerned.

"Actually," I said, "I've been limping since I was twenty. If I stop limping, I'll stop limping."

There's some truth to that last statement. My right hip is an inch higher than the left one—not by design. Some people notice the hitch in my gate, but most don't. Still, I'm always grateful to be moving about the landscape under my own power. But I almost blew all that once—in one of those course-altering moments that occur in life. Though some take time and reflection to recognize, this one was different.

This one transpired under a blistering August sun on the desert prairie of north Texas. For several minutes, broken and bleeding, I wasn't sure I'd walk again. I'd just failed to vault over a looming guardrail from the back of a speeding motorcycle—my ragged skeleton cartwheeling several times before coming to a halt. And there I lay like crumpled paper; an unspeakable pain hammered my extremities.

Someone finally came to help me out of a fogging helmet. An ambulance had been summoned. "Hang on, I'll be back," he said, running off to locate the motorbike's injured driver. It was then that I finally looked down at ripped jeans and some oddly turned legs that didn't seem to be my own. I turned away, wanting to disappear into the Texas hardpan. But beyond that pain, there was also a profound numbness separating me from those odd-angled legs. They no longer felt part of me. Under assault, my mind and body seemed to have parted ways.

At 50 miles an hour I'd made hash of all the strongest bones in the body. I knew then something more was required. I was 20 years old and had to know: "Will I walk again?" Summoning all my courage I turned to face the moment. Against electrifying pain—and observing from what seemed a great distance, I gasped as my right knee twitched; then nudged up half an inch. "I'll live," I told myself, crumbling back in shock. That dodgy self-assessment likely helped save me.

Two months and five days later I left Wichita Falls General Hospital, rail thin and barely able to take a few steps. I wasn't well enough to travel home, but I was in love. I'd continue recuperating at the apartment of one of the nurse's aides who'd held my hand through weeks of surgeries and traction. It was absurdly romantic. My angel's name was Karen.

Yet amongst those weeks of developing romance were endless days when no one visited. I'd only been in Texas for weeks before the crash—my people were all in New Jersey. Healing time crept by slowly; sometimes not at all. August drifted to September, which lumbered on into October. Dead center in Tornado Alley, fall settled in heavy and still, its light strange. Billowing storms flashed past hospital windows, yet I couldn't detect any change in the season.

I daydreamed of home—of friends, familiar sights. But it was more than just a longing for things known. I craved my little corner of earth. My most fervent desire—one still tangibly sharp today, was to simply shuffle, ankle deep, through a pile of October leaves.

It's been two years since Herb pulled up and offered me that lift. I live in Greenfield and close to town these days—where I often leave my car idle in the driveway for a week or more. I walk almost daily, more purposely in winter for the sun and its helpful shot of vitamin D. In warmer months I move alternately by foot and bicycle, sometimes both. No matter the means, that quiet travel fulfills a longing to understand landscape and habitat, and to tread lightly across fertile tracts.

And I always go untethered, without a cell phone or iPod. People today seem indifferent to their surroundings in proportion to the amount of digital armor weighing them down. Out in the world, they're literally elsewhere—peering at screens telling them when to step left or right. We blithely wrap ourselves in the ever-spreading electric grid that's now overheating our habitat—while denying any interdependence on what's literally under our feet. We've allowed ourselves to become a pod race of savants, vulnerable to interruptions of electromagnetic pulses that can instantly pitch our daily lives all into an apoplectic stupor.

I was a full year recovering from that motorbike accident—three aspirin at

a time, four times a day. Left with a tilted axis, I understood the need to keep moving—in order to keep moving. But somehow when I was able, it really wasn't a burden.

Before Texas, I'd barely been out of New Jersey. Most of my recovery year was ultimately spent there. Immobile and youthfully poor, I started reading: Melville, Dickens, Emerson, Conrad, Kerouac, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, and, thankfully, Thoreau. My world got a little bigger. When I was at last well enough to support myself, my first purchases were hiking shoes and a bicycle. They'd keep me moving.

That day along the Deerfield I was actually working, being paid something as I walked. These last six years I've supported a modest lifestyle by driving a bus—which might seem anomalous to someone who prefers to turn his back on his carbon-belching car and hasn't boarded a plane in two decades. Suffice to say, it's what's working for me at the moment.

I mainly drive high schoolers to sporting events, museums, amusement parks, and science fairs. Though there's little glamour, it is mass transportation—efficient from an environmental standpoint. And though I was once a very disagreeable teen, today I'm pretty sympathetic, and happy to be working around their youthful energy. Am I highly paid? No. Are there big benefits? Not so much. But—in one way...yes.

In between transport, there is downtime. I can linger to watch the kids play—or root around the museum they're visiting. Or better yet, I can get my feet moving and poke around the setting onto which we've just descended. Many of my trips are nearby, but some can be two hours distant—from Massachusetts into Connecticut, Vermont, or New Hampshire. To me, walking is my own benefit. I'm paid something for my time, but it's up to me to enrich that compensation.

So I go exploring, which often informs my writing. And, in doing so, I realize that I'm always treading ancient paths—walking atop other people's stories. Present and past do literally merge when you wander into a seventeenth-century graveyard huddled in the shadows of Hartford's downtown towers. I go searching for the seeds of place. Who was here first? When? Why on this bend of river?

On longer trips I might cover 5 or 6 miles tromping a landscape or exploring a riverside—or haunting the frayed edges of eighteenth-century New England towns.

My walks bend quickly toward the past—seeking out the oldest house, the earliest gravestone, an old ferry landing—or a town’s first mill site near an old stone bridge. On rural trips it might be ancient woods or a river crossing bearing an Algonquian name. Faced with the frenzied pace of our techno-consumer society, I’m hunting a language of place. It’s my attempt to recover some essence of earth.

I’ve always had an inescapable awareness that history is much more than the acceptance of dry scholarly tales. I don’t enter a city or town center without thinking—or knowing—that this place was once home to others: Deerfield was once Pocumtuck and Springfield was once Agawam. It never slips my mind that there is a Hockanum in Hadley and another south of the state border in East Hartford—both sites cradled in the shadow of an ancient Connecticut River oxbow. And it never leaves me that the people who first adopted those names for places they knew as home did so in a deliberate tongue that connected them to what they understood as the essence of their earth.

Everywhere we tread, no matter how indecipherable a modern landscape has become, it once had another name and another language—relayed in sounds that strove to offer its history and significance to its denizens. Those names were a key to an unbroken human connection to earth. Nearly all of that was erased. We are often left with just fragments.

That’s why I was once dumbstruck to discover that a young Protestant immigrant and colonial trader named Roger Williams took time in 1643 to write *A Key into the Language of America*, translating Algonquian phrases for the English tongue. That opened a door for me, just a crack. A white spire may still be a great comfort to a little Massachusetts town, but just three centuries back the raising of that steeple signaled subjugation and conquest to still-living peoples whose ancestors had walked here for thousands of years prior.

“I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the corn that grows in the

night,” Thoreau wrote in his essay “Walking”—a swipe at rote Yankee preaching that exhorted ultimate dominance of the lands and landscapes so recently annexed. Today we rush across places where seminal cultures were brutally shattered and dispersed—conquests that, in very short order, led to the wholesale devouring of age-old New England forests.

So I go in search of a language of land. That may seem quaint in a time when Downtown Crossing is most identified as a collecting point for Boston consumers. Or here, Hadley—a 1659 Connecticut River settlement identified as Norwottuck on early maps—is now most notable for its ever-expanding mall strip near Old Bay Road. That’s part of what motivates me to walk. And I also think that maybe the earth talks to us a little bit through our feet, reveals some of its stories. We just seem to have stopped listening—perhaps when we abandoned walking to race across the earth in the hardened shells of carbon-spewing conveyances.

There’s a leafy amusement park in North Granby, Connecticut—relatively pleasant and not overly electrified. One could be tempted to just sit by the shaded pool there. Instead I headed out in mid-June heat along a narrow stretch of Route 189. After a mile I veered off at Day Street—an intersection flanked by an old farmhouse. That led me up along the ridge overlooking the Salmon Brook Valley. Most of the houses turned out to be newer, with little pasture remaining. But then came a break in that developed tract—an opening where the light appeared different.

What popped out next—monstrously sprawling and stubbornly clinging to life was the Dewey-Granby Oak. It was simply stunning, and all the more so set along this old road—holding ground against a spreading suburban shadow. I recognized its name from some distant reading, but knew nothing more. Here, unannounced and magnificent, was that sun-dappled great oak—a specimen worthy of period films set on old English estates.

But truth be told, there was little in the way of detail to adhere to. Rooted here long ago, the Dewey-Granby Oak simply remains a presence to this day. Someone must’ve taken a core sample when this patch of earth was preserved by the Granby

Land Trust. A plaque from 1997 intoned it had begun life perhaps 450 years earlier. However accurate, that implied that it was just a forest ridge seedling at the time of Shakespeare's birth in 1564. The native Tunxis people who were then traveling this trail, which later became Day Street, passed and repassed a white oak growing to maturity. Yet little more than a century on, Europeans began swarming into this little valley, quickly felling the upland tracts to stump pastures. An ancient woodland path disappeared beneath cart ruts and grazing cattle, with only one venerable wolf tree left as witness.

Here then was my day's clue to understanding a moment in time. Survival, longevity, green leaves sprouted along sprawling weathered branches. I'm not sure exactly why that satisfied me. Yet unheralded bits of knowledge are often what offer context to the fabric of life. I paused there for a few minutes, breathing in the continuity of a long life. "I have great faith in a seed," Thoreau wrote. Today my seed was an old oak.

Wilder hikes on bus trips are rare, but there was a recent scramble up Mount Monadnock. We hustled up; then down, to deliver the dozens of prep schoolers we'd unleashed on that hill. But briefly, in between, there were grand three-state views connecting back to another companion who'd passed this way. Thoreau visited here a handful of times, finding Monadnock a worthy place to "go a-fishin'."

Thoreau and I would meet again on a trip to Bellows Falls High. A walk there brought me to the train stop near the Connecticut River where Thoreau once disembarked. Unbeknownst to me, he'd also once walked to the Great Eddy—an ancient Abenaki fishing site below the falls. Into the late 1700s, Yankee farmers could still pull up 1,200 American shad here in a single haul of the net.

But Thoreau and I were both disappointed by the Connecticut River. For Thoreau it was that there was hardly any river at all, the lingering result of the navigation canal diversion for riverboats, just upstream. Mine is the fact that those migrating shad—a half-century after Congress authorized the four-state Connecticut River migratory fisheries restoration, still fail to reach Bellows Falls.

From day one, shad were the program's key restoration species. Far from extinct today, most remain blocked and imperiled 50 miles downstream—trapped in the private power canal below Turners Falls Dam at the place once called Peskeomskut. Though a small portion of the run squeezes upstream toward open Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire habitats—some 200,000 shad or more never make it past a dam where they've been blocked since 1798.

Winter 2015 wasn't easy for ambulation. Still, a mid-February trip to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire had its highlights. Though sidewalks were lined in waist-deep snow, I tramped Exeter's centuries-old byways for hours. I bundled down to the Squamscott River and its old bridge and frozen fishway. A turkey vulture swooped in—yards above the snowy street, the surprise of a brief squall. Sculptor Daniel Chester French's birthplace is marked in downtown Exeter—along with the first meeting site of the Republican Party. Historic houses are now festooned with the symbol of an alewife, or smelt—ancient staples of the Pennacook and those who came after.

But my best walk came in mid-April, though dingy snow piles still had plenty of life in them. I'd dropped my kids off at Lowell National Historic Park. The forecast wasn't great—brooding, with showers expected, but the temperature was nearing sixty. I had hours to burn, and a rain jacket, so I took to the streets. I'd been here once, briefly in midwinter. The Merrimack, Pawtucket Falls, and Lowell's ragged bordering neighborhoods grabbed my fancy. I'd wanted more.

This April day, winter seemed finally ready to relent. The rain held off as I steered toward Market Street, where the Olympic Bakery had offered me a great Greek salad and fresh cannoli last time. The sun burst through in a neighborhood of unvarnished factory houses. I ordered pizza slices to go and found a quiet doorway where I sat in the late morning's humid air. Then I headed to the river.

I was dreaming of the Merrimack's shad runs of old—wondering if endangered shortnose sturgeon had ever spawned this high in its reaches. Landlords were chipping away at stubborn ice, and the gates leading to the Riverwalk remained

closed, still snowed over. But I followed the Merrimack just the same, heading downstream on Pawtucket Street and crossing at the first opportunity. This landed me at the edge of UMass Lowell's North Campus overlooking the city's old mill towers. Ruminating on that bank, I reflected that the earth under me was once part and parcel of a Pennacook village here.

The showers remained at bay so I continued seaward beside the water—crossing the river four times at 3 historic bridge sites. I gained a new sense of Lowell's Byzantine canal system—branching from, and linking, the Concord and Merrimack. As hydraulics got refined, the rivers and river travel here were quickly eclipsed by giant mills and locomotives. Farther on, I stumbled into a tiny urban park honoring Jack Kerouac. Enshrined on a polished slab was one of his poems, a loving edgy retelling of his parents' stark lives here and his own subsequent birth along hard-bit Merrimack shores. It lent a presence to the place.

My best minutes came farther along, at the merging place of two branching canals not far from Lowell's rust-brick downtown and signature Lowell Sun Building. I'd walked back in time along remnants of the centuries-old navigation system to its convergence with the Concord River, just ahead. Here, some 175 years prior, young Henry Thoreau and his brother, John, had passed—heading through locks ushering them onto the Merrimack. They steered upriver on that larger stream—north toward New Hampshire towns that were already felling their last forests to fuel an Industrial Revolution. Under that warming April sun, my day's walk somehow seemed complete.

But there's another walking exploration I've repeatedly engaged in these last four years—my tornado walk. I've literally been walking around inside a tornado. On June 1, 2011, an astonishing EF3 tornado touched down in West Springfield. It skipped across the Connecticut; then battered the landscape for a full 39 miles east—all the way to Southbridge. I'd been driving kids through West Springfield just the day before it thundered through.

Tornadoes stalked the dreams of my youth since childhood, likely an

offshoot of viewing *The Wizard of Oz*. Though these violent storms are strangely fascinating, I've never hankered to experience one in the flesh. In dreams they'd always loomed ominously on the periphery—never quite catching me up. But the absolute destructive power of this one—here in the Northeast—was disturbingly eye-opening. Three people died; hundreds of homes were destroyed. It roared across towns in a traceable half-mile-wide trajectory, just south of Route 20—in places where my bus trips often intersect.

That fall at West Springfield's Eastern States Expo, I walked out the gate and into the neighborhoods due north. Whole houses still lay in ruins, dozens uninhabitable. Thousands of windows had imploded and were boarded up, or were being replaced. What trees remained were hulks, stripped of all lateral branches. At Union Street the devastation across tightly clustered double- and triple-decker apartment homes was withering. A mother died here while shielding her teenage daughter from the storm's fury. Heading home on I-91, Springfield's South End was yet a mass of tumble-brick ruins. In the distance, a checkerboard of tarped roofs led up the ridge toward East Forest Park like it was a staircase painted in blue.

One snowy day the following December, I again walked that tornado's course among the relict trees south of Wilbraham Center. Cars had skittered off the highway, but I got my kids settled in safe. I then bundled up and took off down Main Street, where that unseen power had descended with little warning six months prior. It peeled off roofs, toppled outbuildings, and shattered scores of trees—then stalked off up the mountain ridge toward Monson. One displaced citizen had returned to string up holiday lights on her darkened uninhabitable home.

In late February I took another walk in that great scar where—just minutes later that June day, the tornado barreled down the ridge into Monson Center. Snap, snap—snap, snap, snap!—like twigs, whole trees were crowned; stems jackknifed just 20 feet from the ground. The storm roared off to the east.

And I did the same, later that spring—on a Sturbridge Village trip. It's just a ten-minute walk out the back of that museum to where that EF3 twister

roared in, devouring an entire wooded swamp. It snapped and scattered trunks in astonishing blow-down jumbles, then crossed Route 131 into Southbridge.

On a return trip to Wilbraham two Aprils ago, I backtracked into that storm's path once more. After dropping off my busload I followed a hunch into the landscape. Peepers and warblers called along a winding cross-country trail leading through lowland woods. But then a new slant of light from a little bluff to the north caught my eye. That detour—just a few yards off the trail—brought me dead center into the storm. Helter-skelter before me lay the remnants of a once-broad, upland forest—mature pine, oak and maple, leveled, upended; dead. Hundreds of trees, rank-on-rank—tossed or tumbled, sucked up; then mowed down, like bowling pins.

The devastation was stark and powerful, yet bits of the place were now returning to life. A few trees, pitched and leaning, struggled on. Flickers and nuthatches darted about the edges, feasting on the buggy decay. The trail wound back down, and widened to a swampy marsh, also raked by the storm. Here too were the crowned haphazardly blown trees of a wetland—shorn of branches and left as lifeless hulks. But in the crook of one was a fat jumble of sticks. And there, in profile, sat an erect great blue heron. I quickly counted four more nests and attending sentinels occupying four more of those hulks. Astonishing.

My storm walk in Wilbraham continued this last spring. In mid-April there was but one active heron nest remaining. Wood frogs had arisen from the ground just the day before, but they were quiet. The females had yet to join the gathering. Still I understood that this was a place becoming—a landscape evolving. And that's part of the reason I'll likely take this same walk again, if it happens to turn up on my assigned bus route.

Beyond these unlikely locations, though, there's one particular walk I'm absolutely certain I'll be taking. Every fall, randomly and unannounced, blue sky and a hint of early October chill takes hold of me. Then, for a brief few minutes, I'll joyously drag my clumsy feet through a pile of autumn leaves—relishing the decay they stir into the air and savoring a papery sound that says home. ❧