

Summer Solstice 2015

7pm-8.15pm

Walking circle

K M Smith walks daily and has a quiet contemplative arts practice particularly using drawing as a form of meditation, often taking a line for a walk. Karen works as freelance arts practitioner and has been working in the arts sector for 26 years. Her work has been focused on the challenges of participation, collaboration, artist-led leadership, artistic vision and professional artistic development within the arts ecology. She has worked with many arts organisations and individuals, as a director; as a research fellow; evaluator; facilitator; mentor; in various Arts Council officer posts and as an artist.

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Karen completed an AHRC funded collaborative doctorate at University of Plymouth in 2011. Karen's methods included her facilitation practice of walking and talking. She is currently working on a number of projects including 'thought: cloud: thought' and 'crow'. Karen is also currently a part-time research fellow in mindfulness and performance at Huddersfield University.

Keywords: Pennines, route, walking, contested territory, land.

Introduction

I live on an extensively mapped walking route, on the edge of Pennine moorland in West Yorkshire. The Pennine Way runs behind my home, and the Pennine Bridleway runs in front. Most days I walk on the 'Pennine backbone', on a variation of paths, in an approximate hourly route treading a circle beginning and ending at home. Sometimes I just walk, sometimes I mindfully walk, sometimes I draw, make notes, talk to myself, record sounds: Curlew, Lapwing, Goose, Crow, Grouse, wind. On the solstice I wrote and took photographs as I walked.



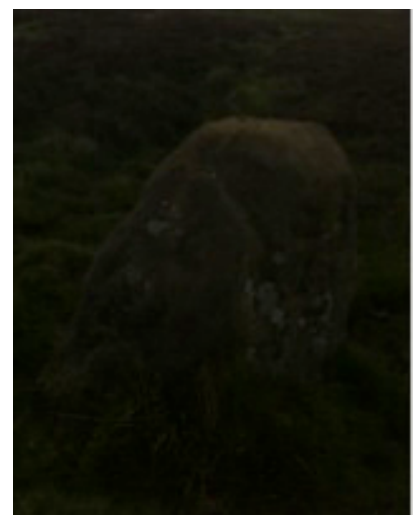
Summer Solstice 2015, 7pm-8.15pm. Walking circle.

Dark cloud. Cold wind. Unseasonable chill. Quiet. The longest day. A Curlew warning spirals loud then the notes descend, twirl away as defence need eases. A Lapwing joins in faintly. I can feel rain coming.

A new visual intrusion: pathway sign. Its text draws me in, even though I know what it says. No dog-owners or dogs visible today, only this sign. Dog-owners who consider themselves 'responsible', take no notice of notices. Hares get chased, birds worried, small mammals half-eaten and left on the path. I notice too much. This is my path, and it is not my path. The territory is shared: worrisome dogs; hare coursers; those who plant fox nooses; and those who lay traps for crows. Today these thoughts torment. On the path and off, their land, our land, it is contested.



I deviate off to a trig point. Another ladder trap for crows has been assembled, nestled in a convenient hollow. It galls. Fifty five steps from a small standing stone, battered, weathered, embellished by bird droppings. This stone is a place of contemplation and conversation for me, my friend's ashes are scattered here. I talk. From where I converse with Millstone Grit I can see the tip of the trap above the landline. So dark now the stone sinks where the dark collects.



And today on this longest day I am tired of thinking over territories, of people's beliefs, of what it is to be human, of what it is to be mindful or mindless of who or what shares your land. It is perhaps only 'landscape'. I have a conflicted contradictory romantic perspective. What do people consider when they traverse here, by bike, or running or walking? Do some plan their visit by map; by walking magazine; by '10 best cycle rides'? Maybe they are occupied with exploring the illegal stretches, the Way rather than Bridle. Cycle tracks layered into peat. Echoing conversations of cyclists shouting between themselves. Sentence fragments of words sent back long-distance, their discussions regarding philosophical, occupational or relationship challenges and outrages. Or questions: Whether they will soon get to their BnB for the night? Will they get to the pub? Is the pub open? Are they lost, is this still right? Or for others, thoughts on successful crow trappings; where the cows have wandered to? Whose are these sheep?

This evening, I see no one and yet human presence lies heavy. Occasional large splats of rain hit my coat. Onwards.

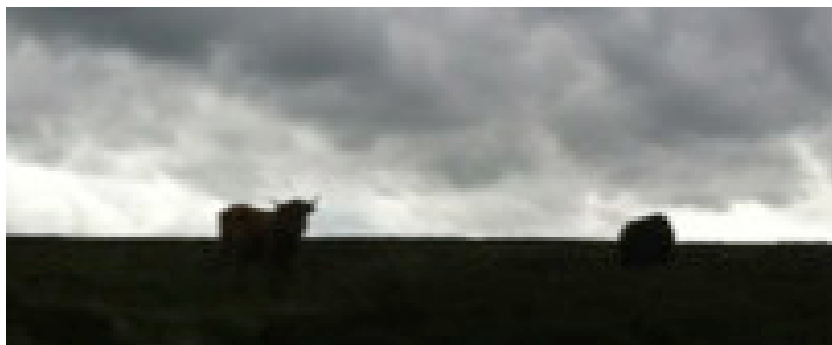


A procession of grouse butts placed a few years ago, rise in linear arrogance and mark the hill. Ugly when close to, grotesque in their gravel foundations. Oddly outbidding the fecund plant life that has retreated, bashed down by digger and spade. Deep wide tract of 4x4 tyres. Very little flora left here, just grass. Still the fauna – sheep, plovers, grouse, hares, curlews, lapwings, beetles, frogs, twites, owls, weasels - share this disturbed place, leaving feathers, tufts, pellets, eggs, felting lumps of fleece. From a distance, drawing a line up the hill, these butts appear oddly beautiful, almost ferrous, sculptural, as if Richard Serra had practised patinas on uniform boxes worked in rusty wood not metal.

Skylarks, midsummer, mid circle and the wind. And I am thinking, through this occasional rain, I will not now see the short eared owl (one of two, but possibly now one of one). Then, heading towards home, turning the circle, the unmistakable flight, and death screech/croak warning of a courting owl. Magnificent and terrifying even in its familiarity. Twice our paths become parallel. I am noticed and likely considered unthreatening. Emley Moor transmitting station lights up in sunshine briefly and brightly; a golden spire. And as suddenly becomes again dark steeple. Its own lights will later twinkle red and yellow in the dark.



And the brown and black cows have been let back on the moor, and favour the recently laid, supposedly erosion-preventing stone path. I regularly walk through them at this time of year. I am curious if they are last year's cows with calves. Each year I get to know them and wonder if they know me. I still feel a surge of fear as I edge through and past them. I'm dog-less, small, singular, non-threatening. Perhaps.



I hear grouse laughing and unusually cannot see them. They do not break cover. Perhaps they are learning the new order since the butts arrived. Cotton grass, and under the smattering water, the ground is dry. Heather is green and silver for now. Purple will come later.

Sheep are here. They are always here, escaped and part-feral. Perhaps they know the meaning of life. They do not like being indoors or on the other side of the fence. I'm the same. My dad says sheep have two aims in life: to escape and to die. Cheerful my dad. Like father like daughter.

I have seen skylarks, the owl, one black-backed gull and three kestrels this evening. Maybe it is one kestrel, not three, still against the wind, following the same arc as me. Snippets of Ted Hughes come to mind.

‘...The wind flung a magpie away and a black-/Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly...’ [1]

Nearly home, well off sunset, ink cloud folding over ink cloud, scattered, gloaming, looming dark. Hughes’ poetry exposed themes of ‘nature’ and what it is to be human, our place within land. Hughes’ parents had lived in a house sitting high up, near here, exposed to the weather and particularly the wind. He described this as akin to living on a ship out at sea: ‘This house has been far out at sea all night’ (‘Wind’ Ibid.). Here my sense of place is disrupted by territory as well as elements. I live in almost constant wind, sometimes it is gentle, more akin to Seamus Heaney’s ‘big soft buffetings’ (Seamus Heaney, ‘Postscript’ from *The Spirit Level*, 1996), sometimes maddeningly oppressively loud. Very rarely it is brutal. Twice I have been overpowered, blown flat, pushed hard by an invisible element.

I live higher up the ridge than Hughes’ parents did. Walking out here has many contexts; romantic, healthy, contemplative, elemental, knowledgeable, terrifying. Finding the new crow trap is a rude interruption to my walk, and a violent rift in my emotional connection to the land I know well.

Rising the hill, past another earlier established ladder trap for crows, set away from the path on private ground. Empty. Good. Farm machinery rattling in the next valley, curves carry the acoustic.

I crave tomato soup and cheese sandwiches. Get in, get the fire lit. I hope the crow traps remain empty. I hope for calm.

Images

All images were taken by the author during the walking timeframe of 7–8.15pm on Sunday 21 June 2015.

[1] Ted Hughes, ‘Wind’, within his first published collection of poems: *Hawk in the Rain*. 1957.

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