Good Walking Mad Morning

by Kieron Devlin

"The walk allows me to ignore the stress of getting there and back each day. It gives me a chance to breathe in the city's famous ripped backsides.

Walking allows me to take time slowly, even if my pace is fast.
It settles problems and enables me to let stuff go."

Destination Bond Street, though I'm no Mr. Bond. I just walk to work each day. I do the one-foot-in-front-of-the-other method. It gets me there.

It starts at Tysoe Street, the newspaper stand. Then into the Exmouth Market with its pastel facades, smell of coffee and baking pastries. The church of the Wholly Lost and Irredeemable casts a shadow on the broken pavement. Then I walk past the Pharmacy where Madonna made her film Filth and Wisdom, about 'all the love and poison of London.'

I count the people of London I pass each day.
1) He does not pass me I pass him. He stands swaying, ruddy faced, beer can in hand, carrying a beer can as though he's been rooted to the spot all night. I walk around him in case he shouts abuse.

2) A young man, smart as a buffed-up button, perhaps an architect or designer? Tall, angular, sensitive face, well dressed,

stork-like. His eyes are warily intrigued, and look away - a hint he's aware of me and I of him. If he's not there, I wonder if he thinks about me in the same way to know he's late. I measure time by him, if early or late, noting where he passes me. If he's not there, I miss him.

Rose of Roseberry Avenue, without a single rose petal strewn in my way. Plus the hot fat smell of frying bacon and sausage breakfast from the working men's café, stuffed into dollops margarine-filled white wedge bread. The Avenue is grey, except in sunlight. I pass Mount UnPleasant sorting office where the post office workers are on strike.

Then I pass the Antoni and Alison shop. This cornerstone building is like a narrow beige Lego brick placed upside down, with painted and embroidered handbags in its window.

"like a narrow beige lego brick placed upside down"

"plus the hot fat smell of frying bacon and sausage breakfast from the working men's cafe, stuffedinto dollops of margarine-filled white wedge bread."

Now I'm under a natural pergola of trees across the road, darkening the daylight. Two months back, a man had his mobile stolen here. He freaked out and climbed up a very tall tree. He got so high he was afraid to get down. The fire brigade and police blocked off Clerkenwell Road. They shouted to him on loud speakers to get down, but he panicked. His English wasn't great. He shook his head and climbed further up. A crowd gathered —people actually spoke to each other. People pointed at the 'crazy' guy. The Police were on the look out for anyone who could translate Hungarian. Even a multi-lingual Russian said he just didn't have Hungarian. The man stayed up that tree for hours, keeping the road blocked.
Now it's Cavendish Mansions. The old grey-brown Victorian monstrosity of flats. An old friend died in this building. He lived on the top floor. His image comes to prod me on the shoulder with warnings. He used to rail against the corrupt ways of the modern world. The future's definitely not what it used to be, he said. His death from muscular atrophy surprised me as he'd fooled us all consistently about his age. We all thought he was ten years younger. The top floor has a treacherous flight of stairs where even I nearly broke a

leg. I stayed here one dark and gloomy Christmas in the confinement of his never-furnished flat. I wonder who lives there now? A family of six from Afghanistan, Colombia or Rumania?

I "I get long and loose in my stride"

Gearing up now, at Theobald's Road, I get long and loose in my stride; I overtake other walkers. I nod towards the Museum on Doughty Street, where Dickens lived for five years. He placed Fagin and Oliver in nearby Saffron Hill when Farringdon train line was the River Fleet. Dickens may have walked this way too, through the mud and slime of the river Fleet. I imagine what Dickens would think of modern London. What novels would he write today? Imagine there's no heaven, no religion too, some hope. What about no buses? No Tube, and everyone walking? A future without cars would be a good enough start for the Lennonscape of London to emerge from the ideal inner vision.

The mass of cyclists now beating cars to swerve around to Red Lion Square. I cut away here from the bus route, to pass the Cochrane Theatre, so I calculate I probably walk faster to work than the two buses would take.
Passerby 3) Holborn Library doorway is a huge recess, perfect for the homeless to form a makeshift bedroom. There's a tramp with long-and-short-knotted dreadlocks. He carries his whole life in a filthy backpack. A whiff of his coat blasts a few feet around him. One morning, I saw him calmly lying back on library steps wrapped in a brown sleeping bag, as though this was the comfiest of beds with fresh cotton sheets. He had probably not had a bath or shower for weeks, yet he was coolly absorbed in trimming his nails with nail clippers.

"he was coolly absorbed in trimming his nails with nail clippers"

I cross Southampton Row, The Cochrane theatre - old home of Rambert, and am building up the long balletic strides. People sun themselves having breakfast in Bloomsbury Square Gardens.

Passerby 4) lady with the windblown hair, carefully styled when she left home passes. Full make-up, that must have taken an hour to do. She clutches her jumbo-sized large cup of coffee and a bag of greasy croissant, cigarette poised between fingers. Smoke fills pavements now. The air is cleaner inside pubs. What a

reversal. Look down and you see – a public ashtray.

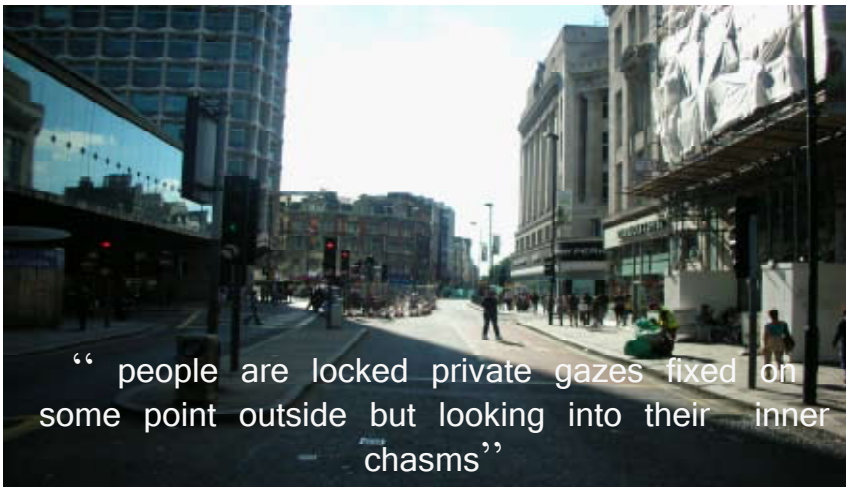
5) The old guy in the shorts with Celtic design sweater. He smiles like he's having a personal street fest. A cross between Popeye and Walk Whitman, quizzically foraging in the rubbish bins, pulling a shopping tartan pattern shopping trolley. He has scabs and sores on the back of his legs. Maybe he sees poetry where we see all we discard. He pulls out a Metro newspaper to read, happy with his catch, free to read all day, without remorse or blame, while others have to work.

There's Pushkin House opposite the Swedenborg House. Legal names metal plaques on brick walls and it's Dicken's Bleak House again: Whitelock and Storr; Bursten and Mueller; Millward-Brown: Very Mr. Tulkinghorn. Lot in a name.

tal ball of their life. No one talking on the bus either. Above these somber faces, is a full blast of stunning black muscle-tilting urgently out of pure white cotton cling-fit boxers. The black in white theme with actor-model Djimoun Hounsou, the new body of Calvin Klein STEEL underwear ads. Does Calvin Klein wear his own underwear? I wonder if all the body envelopes on the bus realize their faces are topped by Djimoun's semi-naked body?

6) The Lady in multi-coloured trainers carrying a bag of plain black 'office' shoes to change into. She's power walking to work.

7) Even larger African lady who wears crocheted shawls and smells like a fragrant orange grove. She breathes heavily as she takes two seats on the bus.



One step: Two: Three: Four: lulls me into a rhythm that detaches from body. I move with purpose near the Centre Point monster. Buzz of rush hour hits.

I am the passenger
and I ride
and I ride
I ride through
the city's ripped backsides.
In the bright and hollow sky.

Double deckers. Carriages of ghosts. Inside people are locked in private gazes fixed on some point outside but looking into their inner chasms. A diversity of faces, mouths all closed, eyes locked on newsprint or just staring as though laser-lighting to the crys-

I'm riding my own body.

A mass of scaffolding making it safer even to walk in front of the oncoming 25 bus than to stay on the pavement. At Tottenham Court Road, it's become

a second crossroads hub, after Piccadilly, for tourist gawpers, and street labourers speaking Polish, Latvian, Portuguese or Yoruba.
The wind gets tetchy here in swift cross currents a test to keep your direction. Even the blast of people spewing out from the Tube criss-cross each other. Doing dodgem elbows with people you don't know.

"The only Zoroastrian from Zanzibar in pop music"

Above right is the statue of Freddie Mercury flicking the end of the mike lovingly in a sure grip. It makes you wonder. 'Dominion' seems right for Freddie, the only Zoroastrian from Zanzibar in pop music. Freddie, offset to perfection with his glitter slash curtain on his behind now obscured by scaffolding, and a claw-like red crane.

8) The guy, short, with his cool Latino good looks and tattooed biceps which his shirt wraps kindly. This is the fast walker's unwritten law. He never looks at me though we pass each day. I don't say anything back. Smiling or speaking would take time we don't have, might spoil the image of fascinating strangers. The best are the most elusive. You must never know them or the magic is lost. To look for a second too long ruins it, means you want to know too much.
Look what we've become. Urban dummies in a song by Kraftwerk.
Pavement dummies.

We walk past.
We walk fast.
We walk by.
Never meeting eyes.

9) A female in black and orange latex bike gear tons up Charing X Road at speed, knocking a woman out of the way. The woman crossing struggles for balance.
'BIIIIIIIITCH. Can't you see it's FUCKIN GrrrrrRRREEEEEEEEN Liiiiiiiiiiiiiii.....ghttt!!!'
Heads turn. Is she all right? Psychocyclists are now a force on the roads with their outbursts of bike rage. Yet we pass by unmoved, entrenched in our bystander apathy.

Logos, big and colourful, the Oz-like shopperama-land of Oxford Street: Carphone Warehouse, The Tottenham Pub, The Cornish Bakehouse McDonalds, Virgin Megastore, Shanon London Fashion Shoes, Subway (seating upstairs), Sports World, Mr Mobile, Lloyds TSB...
The trend for jogging to work, back packs bouncing behind.

10) A man jogging towards me, not coming; but going backwards. Like a Tai Chi movement that uses the reverse muscle capacity. Shirtless, he's showing what an athlete he is, the sweat pours from skin that's shaved,

hairless, shiny.
...Aquarius, Whittard, Red, Crest of London, Caffe Nero, Grabb-a-bite Marina D'Or, Prêt-a-Manger...

11) The Circuit Training teacher with his finely-trimmed beard watches me from the high chair at the window at Prêt-a-Manger. Having his breakfast, reading his newspaper, pen in hand. Not eating bacon to keep so fit. We can't speak through the glass. The moment will come when we do, and he'll smile. The only one to break that rule.
... Wasabi, Halifax, Grab-a-bite, Body Shop, Eat, Oxford News, Jus Lookin...

12) The serious man with the high-domed head and suit passes. Is he Armenian, or Iranian? The huge wing temples on the sides of his head. The look of a lost genius, alien intelligence. That brain must contain entire worlds, multiple cultures warring for space....

Just ...Curry's, Moss, Intimissimi, Game, The 100 Club... Claire's, T Mobile, Phones4u, Plaza Shopping Mall (with the golden gymast doing a knees up statue) Accessorize...

13) The young black boy passes, always in a hurry. He wears black jacket, black pants, black shirt, exactly at the same time each morning. He never looks. He keeps focused on his direction, bound for work. Once, he wore a brown cardigan.
..UNIQLO, O2, Esprit, Aldo, HMV, Soccer Scene, Jeans West, Global, La Senza Lingerie, H&M, Ravel, Office, Faith, HSBC, Schuh, Urban Outfitters, Miss Selfridge, and the biggies...

"I wear blinkers. Best way to save money. Second only to burning your credit cards."

Topshop where Kate Moss flashed her red-robed bod in the window for all of ten seconds. Then Nike Town, a world inside a shop. Shops enough to suit even the most rabid shopping junkie. I must be the only one who passes who does not stop to shop.
Or I drop, having not shopped.
Then, dodging the traffic at Oxford Circus. I don't use the crossing, but nip out into the road to cut three minutes waiting off. Buses turn corners hard and fast. They'd squash you if they could get away with it,
as if to say, you shouldn't be there Stoopid.
...H&M, John Lewis, Zara, H. Samuel, The 1963 Barbara Hepworth Winged Figure - a spirograph in 3D, BHS, Clinton Cards, The Body Shop, Ann Harvey...
Relentless retail therapy can drown out sensible thoughts of saving money. Shopping is the new world number one hobby. Retail is a branch of the entertainment industry, creating its army of shopper junkies.

I wear blinkers. The best way to save money. Second only to burning your credit cards.
John Lewis, House of Fraser, Starbucks, Herbal Inn, Carphone Warehouse, Fossil, Citibank, Debenhams,

yet another Mexx, Crest, Sunglass Hut....

14) I see the two guys: one black, one white; near the fruit stall. They stand together, smoking, inhaling hard and fast. Heads close together so I imagine they are buddies, nattering about who's been backstabbed at work. They stand back – almost a kiss- throw newspapers in the waste bin, then saunter off in opposite directions.

15) Two tourists ask, Excuse me please. Sir. Could you tell we how to get to Selfridges?
I say, all deadpan, Try a car boot sale, or maybe Brick Lane? Loot is also good for selling stuff.
They puzzle it over, and wonder if their English has been misunderstood.
I smile. Just kidding.
They are even more confused.
I point across the road a hundred feet away. There it is.
Oh. Ah. Thank you very very much.
At least they are smiling now, this walk-a-day morning.

Almost there.

16) A blind man walks by Bond Street Tube station tapping the way ahead with his long white extendable cane, a worn out violin case tucked under his arm. He wobbles now and again, or just stands there in an envelope of sounds. He is able to identify each buses from the ripple the tyres make. Finally, arriving at work is, fancifully, as imagination gets pumped up from walking, like landing at port, anchoring in from the sea of people, primed for a day's work.

The home journey is more elbow-dodgems. You hold on to your bag and pockets. Oxford Street is flooded not just with aimless shoppers carrying maps, but with commuters who can't get home in the transport strike.
17) At New Oxford Street, a city gent, white hair, pin striped suit asks me: is this the way to Liverpool Street? It's the general direction, along Clerkenwell Road, I nod. All this walking makes you fit, he says.
Right, I agree. It does.
Fit where I wonder?

The walk allows me to ignore the stress of getting there and back each day. It gives me a chance to breathe in the city's famous ripped backsides. Walking allows me to take time slowly, even if my pace is fast.
It settles problems and enables me to let stuff go.

Is it the getting there that matters, or how much I glean from going each step of the way?

People are the landscape in the city.

Home I go to a journey's end that's as different and the same as the setting off each good walking, mad morning.

© 2008

www.kierondevlin.com
Blog
http://arthealswounds.blogspot.com/