

Walking Towards a Different Future ~ Alyson Hallett

Early on Sunday morning I walked down the middle of a road on the white lines. I did it because I could: there was no traffic, no cars or motorbikes zooming by. It was quietly liberating and reminded me of other times when I have marched in the middle of roads, mainly as an act of protest for a whole host of reasons including demands for action on climate change and against the invasion of Iraq. Inhabiting spaces that are usually out of bounds to pedestrians gives us a visceral experience of things being different and lets us imagine that change is possible, that it can become reality. For a few short hours we feel powerful, visible, united in our demands for a better world.

This early morning adventure in the middle of the road was different though. I was on my own rather than with crowds of people. It was spontaneous rather than organised. It was also a walk rather than a march - I was not for or against anything, I was simply walking in a space that is usually only available for a matter of seconds when I dash from one pavement to another. I carried no placards, had no slogans to chant. Today, I walked alone on the white lines and wondered how, in the space of a few months, everything had changed so drastically.

I felt as if I had gone through a portal into another universe. Three weeks into lockdown and the reality of what's going on is only just starting to pierce the intense shell of shock that's been surrounding me. What has happened to the world I live in? No planes in the sky, no traffic in the road, the augmented sound of bird song everywhere. Three nights ago I stood on my balcony and heard a whirring noise. I looked up and realised that for the first time in my life I was listening to the sound of bats' wings as they flew over my head.

I heard a car approaching from behind and stepped back onto the pavement. There are new freedoms in this mess, I thought, new possibilities in the midst of tragedy, horror, carnage, upheaval so great that I have no words for them yet. I'll leave that to the nurses and doctors for now, to the care workers, to all those who are working night and day on the front line and absorbing the brutal wall of death that's been brought to our shores by a microbe we can't see.

There has been talk of levelling, but this is nonsense. If anything, there's an unlevelling: the gaps between rich and poor are more stark than ever, but there has also been a complete tipping on its end of the hierarchy of importance with regard to work and society. Who do we need most in times like this? Who do we come out to clap for every Thursday? Nurses, doctors, cleaners, care workers, supermarket checkout staff, shelf fillers, lorry drivers - in short, all the people we cannot live without and who, quite often, are paid the least and struggle to survive on salaries that have been frozen or, in reality, decreasing for years.

I walked home via Sainsburys. It was still early, around 7am, and the supermarket wasn't open yet. Opposite the main car park there's another disused car park with the now familiar anti-terrorist concrete blocks barring the entrance. A grey sign on a wall said 'Colleagues'. There was another identical sign in the car park. I skirted the concrete blocks and wandered around the derelict space. I have no idea why it's out of use and there's nothing to indicate if there are plans for future building. There's some scrubland on the left that's been commandeered by trail bike riders or bmx-ers, evidence of tracks and tyre prints.

I opened my arms wide. What was this space, this quietness? I danced for a while and hoped the people in the terraced houses nearby were having a lie-in and wouldn't see me. I span round. I

morphed into a few yoga postures but mainly I just moved my body through space, felt the air around me, then stepped onto a large white arrow painted on the ground to show cars which direction to take for the exit.

I crouched down in the pointed tip of the arrow. As I hunkered there, I began to imagine what might come after lockdown. Plenty of friends have been saying they want to do things differently, that they no longer want to fly here and there for meetings that could just as easily happen on Zoom, that they've been reflecting on how they speak to staff, that they're drawn to examining the balance between work and life.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that over the past couple of years I've heard more stories of people being bullied at work than ever before. The impact of austerity and the increasing prevalence of zero hours contracts has put so much pressure on people that they default to unconscious behaviours that are, in many ways, punitive. I have heard of people who are having their first panic attacks as the demands of work become more and more intense and unrealistic. Friends have left the jobs they love because blame has flown around like a bird without a nest and landed on the nearest shoulders.

This time of lockdown, this great pause, this great loss of so many lives will bring with it, in its wake, equally turbulent shock waves that will pour through us for months and years to come as we try to process what has happened, who we are and who we want to become. Things are changing. We cannot return to life as it was. We know without a doubt that society does exist, that our health and the NHS are vital and that the majority of people are resourceful, creative and caring.

As I left the abandoned car park on the outskirts of Bath, I remembered how I used to love visiting abandoned and derelict spaces in city centres. There was one in particular in Bristol, near the train station, where I'd come across homeless people and drunks sitting on reclaimed car seats and up-turned boxes around burning braziers. I always thought of this as a special place, one where my mind could be free in a way that it can't be in carefully planned, built-up spaces. A wild place. A wilderness.

I realised that we must consider what we want next, how we want to be. So we don't just survive but make a conscious decision to thrive. I wanted a website where people can record the changes they'd like to make. It would be a bank of a different sort, a bank of future ideas, a bank of blessings, a bank of communities remembering they are communities, a bank of the people, for the people, where we can register our sorrows and the ways in which we hope to come through these sorrows.

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Alyson Hallett has published 14 books: sole-authored collections of poetry, short stories, artists' books. Her latest book, *LZRD: Poems from the Lizard Peninsula*, is co-authored with Penelope Shuttle and her recent pamphlet, *Toots*, was shortlisted for the Michael Marks and Callum Macdonald Memorial Awards. She has written an essay on chalk for Radio 3 and drama and an audio diary for Radio 4. She was the country's first poet to be resident in a university Geography Department with a Leverhulme artist-in-residence award. She has been a poet-in-residence at Charles Causley's house and the Small School, Hartland, and writer-in-residence for the Arts Council's Year of the Artist and the Endelienta Trust.

With Triarchy, she has published [Walking Stumbling Limping Falling](#), [Project Boast](#) and, most recently, [Stone Talks](#).