Walking Stumbling Limping Falling

**Alyson Hallett and Phil Smith *Walking Stumbling Limping Falling* Triarchy Press ISBN 978-1-911193-06-7**

I take walking for granted although I know, as Jane Kenyon expressed in her poem ‘Otherwise’ that although ‘I got out of bed / on two strong legs. It might have been /otherwise.’ And indeed, at some point, will be. Meanwhile, I am for the most part what the writers of a remarkable small book call ‘ambulonormative’. I don’t limp, stagger or use a stick so my traversing on foot goes unremarked, by myself as much as by others.

‘Walking Stumbling Limping Falling’ is a slim volume of prose but like the best slim volumes of poetry, every page is opens a series of doors that invite us to enter a house of many mansions. It contains some intriguing pointers to the highways and byways of language and walking.

The book’s title marches along in an insistent two beat rhythm: ‘Walking Stumbling Limping Falling’. Four present participles, or gerunds in upper case on the cover. These appear in concrete form down the title page. The book then moves into A Conversation. Wikipedia tells me:

No generally accepted definition of conversation exists, beyond the fact that a conversation involves at least two people talking together. Consequently, the term is often defined by what it is not. A ritualized exchange such as a mutual [greeting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greeting) is not a conversation, and an interaction that includes a marked status differential (such as a boss giving orders) is also not a conversation.An interaction with a tightly focused topic or purpose is also generally not considered a conversation.Summarizing these properties, one authority writes that "Conversation is the kind of speech that happens informally, symmetrically, and for the purposes of establishing and maintaining social ties."[[1]](#endnote-1)

So can a book be ‘a conversation’? In fact WSLF is mostly an epistolatory exchange, in the form of emails. It begins with the familiar kind of exchange following up after meeting at the Walking Artists Network. The first writer, Alyson, reflects ‘how many challenges there were to the idea of walking as universal and normative’ and Phil responds ‘It’s really time to break the rather conventional idea of walking – to blow it open’. This is what they do, conversing by email until several months later, Phil calls a halt and they decide to create a publication from their exchange.

I’m immediately struck by the immediacy of an exchange of emails and feel a pang of nostalgia for the old collected correspondences of writers. The process of preparing them for publication would have been slower and also involved walking, normatively or otherwise, between boxes and cupboards, archives or libraries. Now we can gather both sides of a correspondence without leaving our desks.

Our guides on this project to break and blow open are a poet, Dr Alyson Hallett (a long-standing friend of mine) and psychogeographer, Phil Smith (whom I’ve never met). That their interest in the topic is deeply personal is soon apparent. Alyson on p22 announces her imminent hip replacement operation and Phil becomes ill after activating on old injury. At the beginning of their correspondence, they discuss approaching other practitioners but soon the focus is firmly on their own direct experience, as specific and concrete as the ground they sometimes fall down on to. These accounts are emotionally rich, moving and provocative.

Some of the questions they pose for each other are useful prompts for personal writing of all kinds. What memories do you have of learning to walk? Have you ever fallen? We might have a good leg and a bad leg - is there such a thing as a ‘bad walk’? What is the most special walk you have taken with another person? Are there ‘fallen places’? If you could have a prosthetic anything, what would it be?

For me, the idea of falling was a potent catalyst for memories and musing. I’ve fallen from grace and fallen in and out of love but have yet to fall on hard times or flat on my face.

I’ve fallen off a bus in my thirties in Istanbul and broken my ankle. I fell off my bike aged five, experimenting with no hands (easy) then no feet too (not recommended) and was a few days in hospital. I ruptured my Achilles tendon, dancing the Gay Gordons in a barn in the South of France and fell in a crumpled heap. I was showing off, pride coming, as it often does, before.

Many of my writing projects have fallen by the wayside. There are very few people I’ve fallen out with.

Falling tends to get a negative press. The fall of a government is a defeat, a failure. In biblical terms, the Fall was a lapse into sin after eating from the the tree of knowledge. But Rebecca Solnit, one of the earliest serious and popular documenters of walking as a practice, reframes ‘the Fall’. In her essay ‘Pandora’s Box and the Volunteer Police Force’ she describes the way that once we gain certain kinds of insights we can’t ‘unhave them’. She writes ‘Some ancient cultures thanked Eve for making us fully human and conscious.’. Falling can do that, make us reappraise a world seen from a new perspective. Alice Oswald’s recent prize-winning collection plays with that idea in its title ‘Falling Awake’. We are used to waking up – how would it be to wake down?

Literal accounts of movement evoke stories which echo ancient myths. A young friend of mine flew close to the sun and has since fallen earthward. Now has his feet back on the ground. My elderly mother fell over in Asda, knocked sideways by a running child, and entered the underworld of the frail for a while.

There’s a growing literature on walking and writing, psychogeography and related practices and in my own specialist area of writing for wellbeing, many of us increasingly draw on the natural world and ecotherapy, moving around outside to enrich the experience of writing. And writing both about walking and not being able to walk and about the body and illness is massively on the increase judging by the numbers of titles piled high in Waterstones, many blurring memoir, fiction and fact.

As well sharing as personal stories in response to these questions, Alyson and Phil throughout their book interrogate the notion of walking as ‘universal and normative’ and the pressure to appear smooth, confident and consistent. How would it be to ‘limp for art’, ‘stumble for health’? I was struck by the intimacy of body and psyche in these exchanges and how in writing about illness the body is both us and other. Alyson describes her pain as an ‘it’ with ‘tides and moods’, her bones ‘know about other’.

The back cover of ‘Walking Stumbling Limping Falling’ carries a photograph of a snail walking across Alyson’s severed femoral head (an evocative term in itself) and her account of how she cleaned the bone will stay with me always. A significant part of herself has been detached and elements of the earth in her replacement hip are now part of her. The title poem of Julia Darling’s 2003 collection ‘Sudden Collapses in Public Places’ conflating bodily and other architectures for me captures the precariousness of all of us.

**Sudden Collapses In Public Places**

like buildings, people can disintegrate
collapse in queues, or in a crowded street

causing mayhem, giving kids bad dreams
of awkward corpses, policemen, drops of blood

but I’m stood here, a miracle of bones
architecturally balanced in my boots

I feel each joint, each hinge and spinal link
jolting to the rhythm of my breath

aware of every tremor in my joists,
and yet I’m scared I haven’t done enough

to be re-enforced and girded, Christ, I fear
those flowers tied to lamp posts, dread the crash

(reproduced with permission of the Estate of Julia Darling)

The poet is addressing mortality, whether it comes as a crash or as the euphemism has it, of finally falling asleep, which for me is a powerful subtext to WSLF. The end, however conceived, is always present when we invoke the metaphor of life as a journey. Recently a Youtube video was circulating which presented an argument against this metaphor by Zen writer, Alan Watts, but I think our tendency to perceive time as linear and circular mostly wins out over a sense of infinite space.

Time now to walk the dog, ambulonormatively today at least, and then to potter about in the world of books and writing.

Darling, J. (2015) Indelible, Miraculous – Selected Poems. Arc Publications

Hallett, A. and Smith, P. (2017) Walking Stumbling Limping Falling. Axminster: Triarchy Press

Kenyon, J. (2005) Let Evening Come – Selected Poems. Hexham:Bloodaxe Books Ltd

Solnit, R. (2014) Men Explain Things to Me. London: Granta

Watts, A. ‘Why Your Life Is Not A Journey’ - Youtube

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversation accessed 31st August 2017](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversation%20accessed%2031st%20August%202017)

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