

Wanderlust: A History of Walking by Rebecca Solnit.

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Chapter 1

TRACING A HEADLAND: An Introduction

Where does it start? Muscles tense. One leg a pillar, holding the body upright between the earth and sky. The other a pendulum, swinging from behind. Heel touches down. The whole weight of the body rolls forward onto the ball of the foot. The big toe pushes off, and the delicately balanced weight of the body shifts again. The legs reverse position. It starts with a step and then another step and then another that add up like taps on a drum to a rhythm, the rhythm of walking. The most obvious and the most obscure thing in the world, this walking that wanders so readily into religion, philosophy, landscape, urban policy, anatomy, allegory, and heartbreak.

The history of walking is an unwritten, secret history whose fragments can be found in a thousand unemphatic passages in books, as well as in songs, streets, and almost everyone's adventures. The bodily history of walking is that of bipedal evolution and human anatomy. Most of the time walking is merely practical, the unconsidered locomotive means between two sites. To make walking into an investigation, a ritual, a meditation, is a special subset of walking, physiologically like and philosophically unlike the way the mail carrier brings the mail and the office worker reaches the train. Which is to say that the subject of walking is, in some sense, about how we invest universal acts with particular meanings. Like eating or breathing, it can be invested with wildly different cultural meanings, from the erotic to the spiritual, from the revolutionary to the artistic. Here this history begins to become part of the history of the imagination and the culture, of what kind of pleasure, freedom, and meaning are pursued at different times by different kinds of walks and walkers. That imagination has both shaped and been shaped by the spaces it passes through on two feet. Walking has created paths, roads, trade routes; generated local and cross-continental senses of place; shaped cities, parks; generated maps, guidebooks, gear, and, further afield, a vast library of walking stories and poems, of pilgrimages, mountaineering expeditions,

meanders, and summer picnics. The landscapes, urban and rural, gestate the stories, and the stories bring us back to the sites of this history.

This history of walking is an amateur history, just as walking is an amateur act. To use a walking metaphor, it trespasses through everybody else's field—through anatomy, anthropology, architecture, gardening, geography, political and cultural history, literature, sexuality, religious studies— and doesn't stop in any of them on its long route. For if a field of expertise can be imagined as a real field— a nice rectangular confine carefully tilled and yielding a specific crop— then the subject of walking resembles walking itself in its lack of confines. And though the history of walking is, as part of all these fields and everyone's experience, virtually infinite, this history of walking I am writing can only be partial, an idiosyncratic path traced through them by one walker, with much doubling back and looking around. In what follows, I have tried to trace the paths that brought most of us in my country, the United States, into the present moment, a history compounded largely of European sources, inflected and subverted by the vastly different scale of American space, the centuries of adaptation and mutation here, and by the other traditions that have recently met up with those paths, notably Asian traditions. The history of walking is everyone's history, and any written version can only hope to indicate some of the more well-trodden paths in the author's vicinity— which is to say, the paths I trace are not the only paths.

I sat down one spring day to write about walking and stood up again, because a desk is no place to think on the large scale. In a headland just north of the Golden Gate Bridge studded with abandoned military fortifications, I went out walking up a valley and along a ridgeline, then down to the Pacific. Spring had come after an unusually wet winter, and the hills had turned that riotous, exuberant green I forget and rediscover every year. Through the new growth poked grass from the year before, bleached from summer gold to an ashen gray by the rain, part of the subtler palette of the rest of the year. Henry David Thoreau, who walked more vigorously than me on the other side of the continent, wrote of the local, "An absolutely new prospect is a great happiness, and I can still get this any afternoon. Two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see. A single

farmhouse which I had not seen before is sometimes as good as the dominions of the King of Dahomey. There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you."

These linked paths and roads form a circuit of about six miles that I began hiking ten years ago to walk off my angst during a difficult year. I kept coming back to this route for respite from my work and for my work too, because thinking is generally thought of as doing nothing in a production-oriented culture, and doing nothing is hard to do. It's best done by disguising it as doing something, and the something closest to doing nothing is walking. Walking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals. After all those years of walking to work out other things, it made sense to come back to work close to home, in Thoreau's sense, and to think about walking.

Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord. Walking allows us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by them. It leaves us free to think without being wholly lost in our thoughts. I wasn't sure whether I was too soon or too late for the purple lupine that can be so spectacular in these headlands, but milkmaids were growing on the shady side of the road on the way to the trail, and they recalled the hillsides of my childhood that first bloomed every year with an extravagance of these white flowers. Black butterflies fluttered around me, tossed along by wind and wings, and they called up another era of my past. Moving on foot seems to make it easier to move in time; the mind wanders from plans to recollections to observations.

The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and

external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. A new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were traveling rather than making. And so one aspect of the history of walking is the history of thinking made concrete— for the motions of the mind cannot be traced, but those of the feet can. Walking can also be imagined as a visual activity, every walk a tour leisurely enough both to see and to think over the sights, to assimilate the new into the known. Perhaps this is where walking's peculiar utility for thinkers comes from. The surprises, liberations, and clarifications of travel can sometimes be garnered by going around the block as well as going around the world, and walking travels both near and far. Or perhaps walking should be called movement, not travel, for one can walk in circles or travel around the world immobilized in a seat, and a certain kind of wanderlust can only be assuaged by the acts of the body itself in motion, not the motion of the car, boat, or plane. It is the movement as well as the sights going by that seems to make things happen in the mind, and this is what makes walking ambiguous and endlessly fertile: it is both means and end, travel and destination.

The old red dirt road built by the army had begun its winding, uphill course through the valley. Occasionally I focused on the act of walking, but mostly it was unconscious, the feet proceeding with their own knowledge of balance, of sidestepping rocks and crevices, of pacing, leaving me free to look at the roll of hills far away and the abundance of flowers close up: brodia; the pink papery blossoms whose name I never learned; an abundance of cloverlike sourgrass in yellow bloom; and then halfway along the last bend, a paperwhite narcissus. After twenty minutes' trudge uphill, I stopped to smell it. There used to be a dairy in this valley, and the foundations of a farmhouse and a few straggling old fruit trees still survive somewhere down below, on the other side of the wet, willow-crowded valley bottom. It was a working landscape far longer than a recreational one: first came the Miwok Indians, then the agriculturists, themselves rooted out after a century by the military base, which closed in the 1970s, when coasts became irrelevant to an increasingly abstract and aerial kind of war. Since the 1970s, this place has been turned over to the National Park Service and to people like me who are

heirs to the cultural tradition of walking in the landscape for pleasure. The massive concrete gun emplacements, bunkers, and tunnels will never disappear as the dairy buildings have, but it must have been the dairy families that left behind the live legacy of garden flowers that crop up among the native plants.

Walking is meandering, and I meandered from my cluster of narcissus in the curve of the red road first in thought and then by foot. The army road reached the crest and crossed the trail that would take me across the brow of the hill, cutting into the wind and downhill before its gradual ascent to the western side of the crest. On the ridgetop up above this footpath, facing into the next valley north, was an old radar station surrounded by an octagon of fencing. The odd collection of objects and cement bunkers on an asphalt pad were part of a Nike missile guidance system, a system for directing nuclear missiles from their base in the valley below to other continents, though none were ever launched from here in war. Think of the ruin as a souvenir from the canceled end of the world.

It was nuclear weapons that first led me to walking history, in a trajectory as surprising as any trail or train of thought. I became in the 1980s an antinuclear activist and participated in the spring demonstrations at the Nevada Test Site, a Department of Energy site the size of Rhode Island in southern Nevada where the United States has been detonating nuclear bombs— more than a thousand to date— since 1951. Sometimes nuclear weapons seemed like nothing more than intangible budget figures, waste disposal figures, potential casualty figures, to be resisted by campaigning, publishing, and lobbying. The bureaucratic abstractness of both the arms race and the resistance to it could make it hard to understand that the real subject was and is the devastation of real bodies and real places. At the test site, it was different. The weapons of mass destruction were being exploded in a beautifully stark landscape we camped near for the week or two of each demonstration (exploded underground after 1963, though they often leaked radiation into the atmosphere anyway and always shook the earth). We— that we made up of the scruffy American counterculture, but also of survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Buddhist monks and Franciscan priests and nuns,

veterans turned pacifist, renegade physicists, Kazakh and German and Polynesian activists living in the shadow of the bomb, and the Western Shoshone, whose land it was— had broken through the abstractions. Beyond them were the actualities of places, of sights, of actions, of sensations— sensations— of handcuffs, thorns, dust, heat, thirst, radiation risk, the testimony of radiation victims— but also of spectacular desert light, the freedom of open space, and the stirring sight of the thousands who shared our belief that nuclear bombs were the wrong instrument with which to write the history of the world. We bore a kind of bodily witness to our convictions, to the fierce beauty of the desert, and to the apocalypses being prepared nearby. The form our demonstrations took was walking: what was on the public-land side of the fence a ceremonious procession became, on the off-limits side, an act of trespass resulting in arrest. We were engaging, on an unprecedentedly grand scale, in civil disobedience or civil resistance, an American tradition first articulated by Thoreau.

Thoreau himself was both a poet of nature and a critic of society. His famous act of civil disobedience was passive— a refusal to pay taxes to support war and slavery and an acceptance of the night in jail that ensued— and it did not overlap directly with his involvement in exploring and interpreting the local landscape, though he did lead a huckleberrying party the day he got out of jail. In our actions at the test site the poetry of nature and criticism of society were united in this camping, walking, and trespassing, as though we had figured out how a berrying party could be a revolutionary cadre. It was a revelation to me, the way this act of walking through a desert and across a cattle guard into the forbidden zone could articulate political meaning. And in the course of traveling to this landscape, I began to discover other western landscapes beyond my coastal region and to explore those landscapes and the histories that had brought me to them— the history not only of the development of the West but of the Romantic taste for walking and landscape, the democratic tradition of resistance and revolution, the more ancient history of pilgrimage and walking to achieve spiritual goals. I found my voice as a writer in describing all the layers of history that shaped my experiences at the test site. And I began to think and to write about walking in the course of writing about places and their histories.

Of course walking, as any reader of Thoreau's essay "Walking" knows, inevitably leads into other subjects. Walking is a subject that is always straying. Into, for example, the shooting stars below the missile guidance station in the northern headlands of the Golden Gate. They are my favorite wildflower, these small magenta cones with their sharp black points that seem aerodynamically shaped for a flight that never comes, as though they had evolved forgetful of the fact that flowers have stems and stems have roots. The chaparral on both sides of the trail, watered by the condensation of the ocean fog through the dry months and shaded by the slope's northern exposure, was lush. While the missile guidance station on the crest always makes me think of the desert and of war, these banks below always remind me of English hedgerows, those field borders with their abundance of plants, birds, and that idyllic English kind of countryside. There were ferns here, wild strawberries, and, tucked under a coyote bush, a cluster of white iris in bloom.

Although I came to think about walking, I couldn't stop thinking about everything else, about the letters I should have been writing, about the conversations I'd been having. At least when my mind strayed to the phone conversation with my friend Sono that morning, I was still on track. Sono's truck had been stolen from her West Oakland studio, and she told me that though everyone responded to it as a disaster, she wasn't all that sorry it was gone, or in a hurry to replace it. There was a joy, she said, to finding that her body was adequate to get her where she was going, and it was a gift to develop a more tangible, concrete relationship to her neighborhood and its residents. We talked about the more stately sense of time one has afoot and on public transit, where things must be planned and scheduled beforehand, rather than rushed through at the last minute, and about the sense of place that can only be gained on foot. Many people nowadays live in a series of interiors— home, car, gym, office, shops— disconnected from each other. On foot everything stays connected, for while walking one occupies the spaces between those interiors in the same way one occupies those interiors. One lives in the whole world rather than in interiors built up against it.

The narrow trail I had been following came to an end as it rose to meet the old gray asphalt road that runs up to the missile guidance station. Stepping from path to road means stepping up to see the whole expanse of the ocean, spreading uninterrupted to Japan. The same shock of pleasure comes every time I cross this boundary to discover the ocean again, an ocean shining like beaten silver on the brightest days, green on the overcast ones, brown with the muddy runoff of the streams and rivers washing far out to sea during winter floods, an opalescent mottling of blues on days of scattered clouds, only invisible on the foggiest days, when the salt smell alone announces the change. This day the sea was a solid blue running toward an indistinct horizon where white mist blurred the transition to cloudless sky. From here on, my route was downhill. I had told Sono about an ad I found in the Los Angeles Times a few months ago that I'd been thinking about ever since. It was for a CD-ROM encyclopedia, and the text that occupied a whole page read, "You used to walk across town in the pouring rain to use our encyclopedias. We're pretty confident that we can get your kid to click and drag." I think it was the kid's walk in the rain that constituted the real education, at least of the senses and the imagination. Perhaps the child with the CD-ROM encyclopedia will stray from the task at hand, but wandering in a book or a computer takes place within more constricted and less sensual parameters. It's the unpredictable incidents between official events that add up to a life, the incalculable that gives it value. Both rural and urban walking have for two centuries been prime ways of exploring the unpredictable and the incalculable, but they are now under assault on many fronts.

The multiplication of technologies in the name of efficiency is actually eradicating free time by making it possible to maximize the time and place for production and minimize the unstructured travel time in between. New timesaving technologies make most workers more productive, not more free, in a world that seems to be accelerating around them. Too, the rhetoric of efficiency around these technologies suggests that what cannot be quantified cannot be valued— that that vast array of pleasures which fall into the category of doing nothing in particular, of woolgathering, cloud-gazing, wandering, window-shopping, are nothing but voids to be filled by something more definite, more productive, or faster paced. Even on this headland route

going nowhere useful, this route that could only be walked for pleasure, people had trodden shortcuts between the switchbacks as though efficiency was a habit they couldn't shake. The indeterminacy of a ramble, on which much may be discovered, is being replaced by the determinate shortest distance to be traversed with all possible speed, as well as by the electronic transmissions that make real travel less necessary. As a member of the self-employed whose time saved by technology can be lavished on daydreams and meanders, I know these things have their uses, and use them— a truck, a computer, a modem— myself, but I fear their false urgency, their call to speed, their insistence that travel is less important than arrival. 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.

Walking is about being outside, in public space, and public space is also being abandoned and eroded in older cities, eclipsed by technologies and services that don't require leaving home, and shadowed by fear in many places (and strange places are always more frightening than known ones, so the less one wanders the city the more alarming it seems, while the fewer the wanderers the more lonely and dangerous it really becomes). Meanwhile, in many new places, public space isn't even in the design: what was once public space is designed to accommodate the privacy of automobiles; malls replace main streets; streets have no sidewalks; buildings are entered through their garages; city halls have no plazas; and everything has walls, bars, gates. Fear has created a whole style of architecture and urban design, notably in southern California, where to be a pedestrian is to be under suspicion in many of the subdivisions and gated "communities." At the same time, rural land and the once-inviting peripheries of towns are being swallowed up in car-commuter subdivisions and otherwise sequestered. In some places it is no longer possible to be out in public, a crisis both for the private epiphanies of the solitary stroller and for public space's democratic functions. It was this fragmentation of lives and landscapes that we were resisting long ago, in the expansive spaces of the desert that temporarily became as public as a plaza.

And when public space disappears, so does the body as, in Sono's fine term, adequate for getting around. Sono and I spoke of the discovery that our neighborhoods— which are some of the most feared places in the Bay Area — aren't all that hostile (though they aren't safe enough to let us forget about safety altogether). I have been threatened and mugged on the street, long ago, but I have a thousand times more often encountered friends passing by, a sought-for book in a store window, compliments and greetings from my loquacious neighbors, architectural delights, posters for music and ironic political commentary on walls and telephone poles, fortune-tellers, the moon coming up between buildings, glimpses of other lives and other homes, and street trees noisy with songbirds. The random, the unscreened, allows you to find what you don't know you are looking for, and you don't know a place until it surprises you. Walking is one way of maintaining a bulwark against this erosion of the mind, the body, the landscape, and the city, and every walker is a guard on patrol to protect the ineffable.

Perhaps a third of the way down the road that wandered to the beach, an orange net was spread. It looked like a tennis net, but when I reached it I saw that it fenced off a huge new gap in the road. This road has been crumbling since I began to walk on it a decade ago. It used to roll uninterruptedly from seato ridge top. Along the coastal reach of the road a little bite appeared in 1989 that one could edge around, then a little trail detoured around the growing gap. With every winter's rain, more and more red earth and road surface crumbled away, sliding into a heap at the ruinous bottom of the steep slope the road had once cut across. It was an astonishing sight at first, this road that dropped off into thin air, for one expects roads and paths to be continuous. Every year more of it has fallen. And I have walked this route so often that every part of it springs associations on me. I remember all the phases of the collapse and how different a person I was when the road was complete. I remember explaining to a friend on this route almost three years earlier why I liked walking the same way over and over. I joked, in a bad adaptation of Heraclitus's famous dictum about rivers, that you never step on the same trail twice; and soon afterward we came across the new staircase that cut down the steep hillside, built far enough inland that the erosion wouldn't reach it for many years to come. If there is a history of walking, then

it too has come to a place where the road falls off, a place where there is no public space and the landscape is being paved over, where leisure is shrinking and being crushed under the anxiety to produce, where bodies are not in the world but only indoors in cars and buildings, and an apotheosis of speed makes those bodies seem anachronistic or feeble. In this context, walking is a subversive detour, the scenic route through a half-abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences.

I had to circumnavigate this new chunk bitten out of the actual landscape by going to a new detour on the right. There's always a moment on this circuit when the heat of climbing and the windblock the hills provide give way to the descent into ocean air, and this time it came at the staircase past the scree of a fresh cut into the green serpentine stone of the hill. From there it wasn't far to the switchback leading to the other half of the road, which winds closer and closer to the cliffs above the ocean, where waves shatter into white foam over the dark rocks with an audible roar. Soon I was at the beach, where surfers sleek as seals in their black wet suits were catching the point break at the northern edge of the cove, dogs chased sticks, people lolled on blankets, and the waves crashed, then sprawled into a shallow rush uphill to lap at the feet of those of us walking on the hard sand of high tide. Only a final stretch remained, up over a sandy crest and along the length of the murky lagoon full of water birds.

It was the snake that came as a surprise, a garter snake, so called because of the yellowish stripes running the length of its dark body, a snake tiny and enchanting as it writhed like waving water across the path and into the grasses on one side. It didn't alarm me so much as alert me. Suddenly I came out of my thoughts to notice everything around me again— the catkins on the willows, the lapping of the water, the leafy patterns of the shadows across the path. And then myself, walking with the alignment that only comes after miles, the loose diagonal rhythm of arms swinging in synchronization with legs in a body that felt long and stretched out, almost as sinuous as the snake. My circuit was almost finished, and at the end of it I knew what my subject was and how to address it in a way I had not six miles before. It had come to me not in a sudden epiphany but with a gradual sureness, a sense of

meaning like a sense of place. When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back; the more one comes to know them, the more one seeds them with the invisible crop of memories and associations that will be waiting for you when you come back, while new places offer up new thoughts, new possibilities. Exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains.