Bookmarks

In the footprints of Edward Thomas

Submitted by James Frank Riding to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis muddies the idea of singular being, tracing the footprints of nature writer and poet Edward Thomas, from the beginning of his epically creative final four years, to the site where he died in 1917, during the Battle of Arras. It is presented as a series of engagements with landscape, writing, and poetry; affective mapping, chasing memory-prompts, bookmarks and the shock of the poetic. The journeys seek to return to an ‘open’ idea of the geographical imagination, negating a negative, reductionist form of geography; shifting the focus away from sociologically determined notions of mobility. A resident of England for all his life, but with Welsh heritage, Edward Thomas believed he belonged nowhere. His texts: little time capsules, admixtures of social commentary, environmental action, and personal musings, are archaeological exercises, presenting a complicated picture of loss, demonstrating the value of artistic imagination. Loss - and subsequent estrangement from the world - would become his poetic source. This thesis is about trying to understand the relationship between poetry - indeed all ‘land writing’ - and place. How it affects in-place, what it does in-place? To understand this relationship properly it was necessary to consider why, as humans, we write? To find out what the subjective condition of the poet, or writer, emerges out of - in order to relay the experience of meeting poetry in-place. Edward Thomas began as a nature writer and became a poet after much agonizing. This made him a useful subject (object) (neither). Furthermore he suffered a long period of introspection and had a knowledge of Freud and psychoanalysis - which he underwent in 1912. This was played out in what Edna Longley (2008) terms; ‘poetic psychodrama.’ His poems often feature a split self or switch between patient and analyst (Longley, 2008). *The Other Man*, is his doppelganger, who he plays himself off against: the poems are, as such, multi-voiced, counterpointed, intersubjective. Deleuze and Guattari wrote in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988: 3): ‘since each of us was already several, there was already quite a crowd.’ Edward Thomas knew this all too well. From the beginning of this ambulatory homage my psyche became inextricably linked with his.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE:</td>
<td>Edward Thomas: geographer and poet</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROLOGUE:</td>
<td>Death Drive: final tracings</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOOK 1:</td>
<td>Preamble: literary hitchhiking</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERMISSION:</td>
<td>Kettled: a march on parliament</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOOK 2:</td>
<td>In Pursuit of Spring: a recycling</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POEMS:</td>
<td>Road kill, myself, and other dead animals</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td></td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td></td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOOKMARKS</td>
<td></td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For C

'It becomes clear, as it is not in a city, that the world is old and troubled, and that light and
warmth and fellowship are good.'

(Beautiful Wales, Edward Thomas)
A SCHIZOANALYTIC CARTOGRAPHY
in the traces of Edward Thomas

LANDMARKS...

WALES

ENGLAND

DYNNACK

OXFORD

THE SOUTHERN WAY

THE OXFORD

DEATH

CLAPHAM

FRANCE

IN PURSUIT OF STRING

LITERARY HITCHHIKING
Preface

What will they do when I am gone? It is plain
That they can do without me as the rain
Can do without the flowers and the grass
That profit by it and perish without.
I have but seen them in the loud street pass;
And I was naught to them. I turned about
To see them disappearing carelessly.
But what if I in them as they in me
Nourished what was great value and no price?
Almost I thought that rain thirsts for as draught
Which only in the blossom’s chalice lies,
Until that one turned back and lightly laughed.

(What will they do when I am gone? Edward Thomas)

‘Gradually the noise died down, and at last a message came from brigade that we would not be needed. It had been another dud show, chiefly notorious for the death of Charles Sorley, a twenty-year-old captain in the Suffolks, one of the three poets of importance killed during the war. (The other two were Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen).’

(Goodbye to All That, Robert Graves)
Edward Thomas

Geographer and Poet

‘He [Hilaire Belloc] is such a geographer as I wish many historians were, such a poet as all geographers ought to be, and hardly any other has been.’

(A Literary Pilgrim in England, Edward Thomas)

‘Edward Thomas was, from a young age, a walker, both by night and day. In his mid-twenties, when he was suffering from depression, he would often set off on long walking tours, alone, in the march-lands of Wales and England. Like so many melancholics, he developed his own rituals of relief, in the hope that these might abate his suffering, and that he might out-march the cause of his sadness.’

(The Wild Places, Robert MacFarlane)

In 1906, Edward Thomas, published The Heart of England. The book begins with Thomas leaving London, on foot, with the reader initially stumbling upon an archetypal suburban street scene; unbroken rows of houses, all the same. Everything is described in vivid detail, as Thomas follows a boy of nine years old, moving briskly in every direction, and a strange, free, hatless man, ignoring puddles - a traveller. Colours, angles, flows, lines, loops, patterns, textures, sounds, smells. The mood becomes darker as night falls and Thomas travels further into a preemptive Ballardian suburbia; the place has no meaning, no history, nothing understandable to Thomas, it is half-built, unnaturally devastated, dejected, sorrowful, and despairing. The rain formed a mist and a veil over the skeletons round about, but it revealed more than it took away; Nature gained courage in the gloom (Thomas, 1906: 7). Thomas sets out that night, so as not to
endure another night of torment, the noise of his heels and stick staining the immense silence. He feels entrapped on his exit from the city - in a borough of London once nothing but fields. Looking up at the thousands of people in their lighted windows, he proclaims, ‘most men are prisons to themselves’ (Thomas, 1906: 8). Not the brave, cheerful lights, in the distance, which we strain our eyes for as we descend from the hills of Kent or Wales: a place of refuge in complete darkness. The first landscape Thomas encounters after leaving London is The Lowland. Of the landscape, Thomas writes; ‘how nobly the ploughman and the plough and three horses, two chestnuts and a white leader, glide over the broad swelling field in the early morning’ (1906:23). He continues to express his love of ploughs and what they represent for a further five pages. Evident in these pages, is a desire to preserve practices, which due to mechanisation during the Industrial Revolution of the previous century, are witnessed less and less. By writing about traditional rural practice, he is preserving something of the landscape before him. It is this longing to ‘make the glimpsed good place permanent,’ which is evident in Thomas’ later - more famous - poetry; ‘although somewhere beyond the borders of Thomas’ mind, there was a world he could never quite come at’ (Thomas, 1964:11). The book ends with a collection of traditional folk songs. I decided to begin with this particular Edward Thomas book, as it is turns out to carry thought on landscape-performance-memory to challenge, echo, and surprise our own. Older books, perhaps beyond where we would normally look, also offer a resource, for our thinking of current living landscapes - dead, mute, absent, inaccessibility’s, and all. I could easily have begun with the book, The South Country, from 1909, in which Thomas wanders through every season, and covers all the counties from Hampshire to Cornwall, and from Surrey to Sussex. As he travels, his mind also wanders, involuntary memories materialize, and past events are recollected. Whilst in East Hampshire, Thomas (1909:9) foreseeing our current wonderment with representing immediacy, perception, and affect, writes:

‘The spirit of the place, all this council of time and Nature and men, encircles the air with a bloom deeper than summer’s blue of distance; it drowses while it delights the responding mind with a magic such as once upon a time men thought to express by gods of the hearth, by Faunus
and the flying nymphs, by fairies, angels, saints, a magic which none of these things is too strange and supernatural to represent. For after the longest inventory of what is here visible and open to analysis, much remains over, imponderable but mighty. Often when the lark is high he seems to be singing in some keyless chamber of the brain; so here the house is built in shadowy replica. If only we could make a graven image of this spirit instead of a muddy untruthful reflection of words!"

In 1914 Thomas published *In Pursuit of Spring* - a pursuit to become a poet, a pursuit of poetry that could have been called; *In Pursuit of Coleridge*. And his soon to be good friend, the poet Robert Frost, concluded that the book was poetic and that ‘Thomas was a poet behind the disguise of his prose’, encouraging him on their first meeting to begin writing poetry (Thomas, 1985: 223). This is unclearly discussed in a number of biographies, where Thomas appears Frost’s ‘debtor, in verse and in inspiration’ (Sergeant, 1960: 209). Eleanor Farjeon, another writer and close friend, could have encouraged him to begin writing poetry. The war was also a factor. He could have merely decided himself; the outpouring of eighty-five poems in seven months from November 1914 to the day he enlisted, is astonishing, and would indicate that this may be the case. As, R.G Thomas (1985: 223) writes, ‘we can see Thomas clearing the ground [in his prose] in preparation for a thorough understanding of the self that, he feared had gone astray’. *In Pursuit of Spring* was therefore an important geographical excursion for Thomas. It is now widely understood, rightly so, that Thomas had been a poet all his life, and that Frost produced the enharmonic change, which made him not a different man, but the same man in another key (Farjeon, 1958: 56). Put simply, Robert Frost kick-started Thomas’s poetry (Longley, 2008: 15). Of the one hundred and forty four poems written in the final two years of his life, ‘sometimes at the rate of one a day’, *The Manor Farm* (1914), *The Combe* (1914), *Adlestrop* (1915), *The Chalk Pit* (1915), *A Tale* (1915), *The Path* (1915), *Lob* (1915), *Aspens* (1915), *The Mill Water* (1915), *Wind and Mist* (1915) and many others still resonate, despite their speedy execution (Sacks, 2004: xxiv). And as he would have wished defined him as a person, after years spent doing hack work. His poetry is simple, honest, and understated, in a
disarmingly low-keyed tone of voice’ (Motion, 1980: 169): the sound of sense (Motion, 1980). Moments of thought and memory perforate, and expound all that is ‘ungraspable in the very nature of words, and memory, and consciousness’ (Danby, 1959: 313). Leaving, therefore, only disconnected impressions of landscape, providing merely a series of fragments for the reader. Lanes, trees, woods, brooks, pits, roads, hills, farms, pubs, paths, houses, chapels, signposts, and animals are interwoven with places, weather, people, and countryside practices. He does not sit very easily with the present, preferring the past, but is in many ways a covert modernist in his style. His verse subtly upsets. Rhyme schemes are rarely used; a rhyming couplet is particularly rare. In short, his poetry resists categorisation. He is on the cusp of old and new, ‘between antiquated traditionalism and elitist modernism,’ an isolated figure, not included in Michael Robert’s epoch-defining Faber Book of Modern Verse (1936) (Wisniewski, 2009:1). Despite this, Ted Hughes, once said Edward Thomas is “the father of all of us”. Edna Longley reiterated this statement, arguing Thomas began the modern poetry movement with Robert Frost and W.B Yeats, due to their rejection of a constricted verse - and imagism led poetry - allowing freedom (Longley, 2008: 20). Furthermore, his version of Romantic Ecology (Bate, 1991), or eco-historical writing, naturalistic but very much committed to the people who cultivate the landscape, shares many similarities with current ecological thought: a pastoral melancholic, ‘longing to make the glimpsed good place permanent' (Thomas, 1964: 11). The fleeting, fractured moments he captured, of intimate disintegrating places, set in the wider context of a disappearing, encroached upon, English countryside and its traditional practices are often praised for their “Englishness”; in spite of his Welsh heritage (see Wisnieski, 2009). And the landscape represented has also in many ways become the archetypal “rural idyll” preserved for eternity in eerie, haunted, uncanny verse - due to his ‘residual mystical inclinations’ (Longley, 2008: 14). Is this Thomas though merely a caricature, a pastoral melancholic, a harbinger of death, journeying from the city to the sea, through lowlands, uplands, and mountains? There is a critical issue here, remembering Edward Thomas as a morbidly depressed pastoral melancholic, is not entirely realistic. No one can be summed up in a neat phrase. Other histories of Thomas, his life and his work, can be written. His use of a doppelganger in his poetry and prose, diagnosed mild schizophrenia, and dual national identity (Edward Thomas had a Welsh heritage
but spent most of his life in England), all noted by Andrew Motion in a chapter about Thomas entitled, *Double Vision* from 1980, also muddy the water - along with his admission that his books often turned out to be books made out of books founded on other books. His work is not a bourgeois romanticism, rather, matter of fact. He does not take himself as seriously as is often written, and is quite self-deprecating on occasion, and always critical of his position within the land writing genre - his is not an authoritative voice. There is therefore no singular history regarding Thomas. So why must we archive, and evidence, in such a particular, staid way. Preserving and memorialising, with biography after biography, memorial after memorial, all of which are very similar in their substance. This archival desire is described by Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2000:182), as a distinctly modern idea.

Edward Thomas died in the battle of Arras, Easter Monday, 9th April, 1917, at 7.36 a.m. hit by a stray shell at the Beaurains observation post (Thomas, 1985: 292). There was not a scratch on him. The sound of the blast stopped his heart. He was 39. A sombre war diary is published at the back of the new edition of the collected poems, where he writes how a shell landed beside him a day earlier but did not explode. There was a letter found in his pocket when he died, with the diary, and a photograph of his wife. The poems Thomas wrote, are available in their original form and in endless newer volumes, along with letters written to friends and family, a fragment of autobiography, many biographies - including a new one; *Now All Roads Lead to France: the Last Years of Edward Thomas* (Hollis, 2011) - guides to his poetry and the places in which the poetry was written, all his topographical and critical work, and even new poems, which were found only recently. Thomas also has a hillside dedicated to him, which is marked with a sarsen stone, two stained glass church windows, his name is etched on to the war poet’s memorial in Westminster Abbey, and his homes are marked with plaques stating that the poet once lived there. Memory prompts. And over a quarter of a century ago, in 1980, a Fellowship, a band of brothers, was established formally, to further perpetuate his life and work and to conserve the countryside known to Edward Thomas and recorded in his writings, by repeatedly walking it; *The Edward Thomas Fellowship* - its roots go back further, to the laying of the sarsen stone memorial in 1937.
To the question “Who is speaking?”, we answer sometimes with the individual, sometimes with the person, and sometimes with the ground which dissolves both. “The self of the lyric poet raises its voice from the bottom of the abyss of being; its subjectivity is pure imagination.” But a final response yet remains, one which challenges the undifferentiated primitive ground and the forms of the individual and the person, and which rejects their contradiction as well as their complimentarity. No, singularities are not imprisoned within individuals and persons; and one does not fall into an undifferentiated primitive ground, into groundless depth, when one undoes the individual and the person. The impersonal and the pre-individual are the free nomadic singularities. Deeper than any other ground is the surface of the skin. A new type of esoteric language is formed here which is its own model and reality.’

(The Logic of Sense, Gilles Deleuze; The Birth of Tragedy, Friedrich Nietzsche)

‘Each one of us should make a surveyor’s map of his lost fields and meadows. Thoreau said that he had the map of his fields engraved in his soul. Thus we cover the universe with drawings we have lived. These drawings need not be exact. They need only to be tonalized on the mode of our inner space. But what a book would have to be written to decide all these problems!’

(The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard)
The journey so far...

‘Looking back at these essays written over the past decade I think what they share is a love of muted even defective storytelling as a form of analysis. Strange love indeed; love of the wound, love of the last gasp... It goes like this: reality is a shell game; our writing should be too. For a moment they interlock, but then a new pattern of ordered disorder forms, always the one before the last...’

(Walter Benjamin’s Grave, Michael Taussig)

‘Those academics who weren’t in their pods on motorways were wandering friars on the footpaths of England. Nature-writers like Edward Thomas and Richard Jefferies were rediscovered and revalued, their downland walks invigilated by keen-eyed young men in khaki shorts. Robert MacFarlane, Cambridge lecturer, tree-climber, champion of wild places, led the way back to the era of ambulatory essays on dew ponds, standing stones, pilgrim tracks.’

(Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project, Iain Sinclair)

The articulation of the life of Richard Jefferies, written by Edward Thomas in 1909, anticipated his own future. For Thomas, Richard Jefferies was more than a nature writer: he was a guiding spirit of the English landscape, affecting a profound influence upon his own writings. Thomas regarded Jefferies as somewhat of a mentor, once describing the body of work he created as a gospel, an incantation. A similar mystic communion with nature draws them together. And there are many sympathetic resonances between Edward Thomas and Richard Jefferies. A family connection: Thomas holidayed as a child in Swindon, where his grandmother lived - part of his intellectual and spiritual development. Their life spans - Edward lived only four months longer.
And a creative intensity squeezed into the last few years - a slow gathering, followed by a late spate, and fulfilment of creative being. Their work is not a naive celebration of flora and fauna, and a dumb blast at modern society, a meditation on purely the trees and the hills; the landscape is specifically peopled. And their books are altogether more complicated, precise, witty, technical, nuanced, scholarly, and painterly. Jefferies is best known for his writings about nature and the countryside; site-writing and memory-work created from wanderings, ending up in a sort of prose-poetry (see *The Gamekeeper at Home*, 1878; *Wildlife in a Southern County*, 1879; *The Amateur Poacher*, 1879; *Round About a Great Estate*, 1880). But like Edward, he also wrote extensively about London (see *Nature Near London*, 1883; *After London; Or, Wild England*, 1885) and its surrounds, about towns, about the salvo of coming industrialisation, and about the perceived loss of a harmonious interaction between nature and people, a rural order - a loss that came to define them both as writers; indeed for Edward, loss became his poetic source, down the line. The weaving together of supposed urban sites, and rural settings, over the course of a book, is interesting. Clever readings of landscape as they witnessed it, describing its buildings and infrastructure, its visual qualities, its sensuous atmosphere, as well as the practices of the time, for both leisure and work: the manipulation and transformation of things, fishing, swimming, shooting, walking, cycling, labouring, ploughing, cooking, eating, travelling by train, drinking in pubs, shopping at markets, and going to an art gallery. As such they act as little time capsules, admixtures of social commentary, environmental action, and personal musings; archaeological exercises, presenting a complicated picture of loss, and demonstrating the value of artistic imagination.

Edward never really saw himself as a great nature writer. He wrote though of a most select shelf of country books: Cobbett, White, Bourne, Jefferies, Hudson, and Burroughs. Include Thomas now on that shelf. Who would be included on the nature writing shelf today? For as long as people have been writing, they have been writing about nature; the shelf must reach further than six or seven men. What of *New Nature Writing* for instance, with its specific, ambitious, and possibly revolutionary manifesto, stating: the way people write about nature needs to change, as our conceptions and experiences of nature change - citing economic migration, overpopulation,
and climate change, as transformers of the natural world into something unfamiliar (see Cowley, 2008). Nature writing is not supposed to be about bearded men with boots and a stick anymore, walking out into the wild; nor is work meant to be written in the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer. Writers are to be on a journey of discovery, creating voice-driven narrative, told in the first-person, and present in the story; if only bashfully. Their work an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue. Those associated with New Nature Writing: Robert MacFarlane, Richard Mabey, Kathleen Jamie, Tim Robinson, Roger Deakin, and Jonathan Raban. And those less so (of the Marxist, Post-Phenomenological and Psychogeographical tradition): Iain Sinclair, Will Self, J.G Ballard, George Orwell, Raymond Williams, and W.G Sebald. A number of American writers would also have volumes on the shelf: Bill Bryson, Hunter S. Thompson and Jack Kerouac to name but a few. All of these writers have subverted the nature writing, travel writing, tradition, to varying extents, creating somewhat of a renaissance in the genre of narrating a form of the self, moving through landscapes Edward knew of well, now radically different - weaving sticky streams of consciousness, stitching themselves to the fabric of the folding land. Edward was to become the lynchpin, encouraging the elongation of the shelf. Edward: the covert modernist, ‘pastoral’ poet.

For writers and poets, the act of travelling through landscape is a process of interpretation, whereby they read the landscape, in a state ‘open’ to the poetic-event, enabling poesis (Ebbatson, 2010). I have been searching for the poetic-event, or the shock of the poetic, re-walking and re-cycling the tracks of the nomadic nature poet, and writer of the countryside, Edward Thomas, often with his literary society, muddying the idea of singular being, energizing my work with his and creating in the process, a post-structuralist travelogue. The journeys seek to return to an ‘open’ idea of the geographical imagination, negating a negative, reductionist form of geography; shifting the focus away from sociologically determined notions of mobility. This thesis is about trying to understand the relationship between poetry - indeed all ‘land writing’ - and place. How it affects in-place, what it does in-place? To understand this relationship properly it was necessary to consider why, as humans, we write? To find out what the subjective condition of the poet, or writer, emerges out of - in order to relay the experience
of meeting poetry in-place. Edward Thomas began as a nature writer - topographic writer - and became a poet after much agonizing. This made him a useful subject (object) (neither). Furthermore he suffered a long period of introspection and had a knowledge of Freud and psychoanalysis - which he underwent in 1912. This was played out in what Edna Longley (2008) terms; ‘poetic psychodrama.’ His poems often feature a split self or switch between patient and analyst (Longley, 2008). The Other Man, is his doppelganger, who he plays himself off against: the poems are, as such, multi-voiced, counterpointed, intersubjective. As, Deleuze and Guattari wrote in A Thousand Plateaus (1988: 3): ‘since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.’ Edward Thomas knew this all too well. From the beginning of this ambulatory homage my psyche became inextricably linked with his. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s final book The Visible and the Invisible (1968), there is an attempt to think through the limits of subjectivity; his singular body-subject. Presence and immediacy - the primacy of perception - fade into the background, replaced by a discussion of the penetration of matter by sense, and a will to unite the sensible and the intelligible - the intertwining. There is a body of the mind, and a mind of the body and a chiasm between them (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 259). Using an ontology of the flesh Merleau-Ponty strived to intertwine this chiasm. In short, I project sense onto things, or, more precisely, sense penetrates matter, sense from this matter penetrates me, affects me, there is then a wrapping around of the seer and the seen, self and world... I become the world, the world becomes me, always... Transcendence... The world is disclosed:

‘The things can solicit the flesh without leaving their places because they are transcendencies, rays of the world, each promoting a singular style of being across time and space; and the flesh can capture in itself the allusive, schematic presence of the things because it is itself elemental being, self-positing posture, self-moving motion adjusting itself to the routes and levels and axes of the visible. This intertwining, this chiasm effected across the substance of the flesh is the inaugural event of visibility (Lingis, 1968: lvi).’
As has been observed, my body does not end at my finger tips, but equally my body does not start at the horizon, which I see in the distance, or the ground, which I perceive through the soles of my poor quality trainers, allowing stones to dig at my feet. *Flesh goes farther than the immediate*. In the chapter *The Intertwining-The Chiasm*, from *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), Merleau-Ponty articulates a wrapping around, the flesh, of a singular seer and a singular seen, and the intertwining slowly unpicks itself. There are different ‘appearances of the flesh’ (Derrida, 1994). Sense penetrating matter and a subsequent eventful disclosing by matter is always fractured. Furthermore, the flesh seems to imply rupture, or separation, not continuity and unity between the touched body and the thing which touches, and vice-versa. That which touches is never exactly that which is touched (Derrida, 2005:241).

Where Merleau-Ponty strived to write the intertwining of self and world, landscape for Jean Luc-Nancy is defined by an originary estrangement, which occurs in the ‘suspension of presence’ (Nancy, 2005:61). In a chapter from *The Ground of the Image* entitled, *Uncanny Landscape*, Nancy posits, ‘the landscape begins with the notion, however vague and confused, of distancing and of a loss of sight, for both the physical eye and the eye of the mind’ (Nancy, 2005:53). Instead of using Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh to articulate the relationship between the body and the world, wrapping around seer and seen, Nancy’s intrication is:

‘a touch in distance, a contact in separation of sense and matter, which exposes the world not in the making present of a substance, or consubstantiality of spirit and body, but in sundering/conjoining of the two. This is a reiteration of the idea that the spatial-temporal event of being, as the extension or exposure of sense to impenetrable matter, does not permit the world to be seen in terms of substances, or of the presence and self-presence of things, rather it must always be seen in terms of this separation and distancing of sense, which is also an event of touch, spacing, sharing, position, and disposition (James, 2006:138). ’
Derrida discerns a connection in *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* between touch and traditional haptological metaphysics: a metaphysics of presence. However, as Derrida (2005:179-180) goes on to write:

‘Nancy appears to me to break with, or at least take his distance from, forms of haptocentric metaphysics. His discourse on touch is neither intuitionist, nor continuist, nor homogenist, nor individualist.’

Nancy, by writing in loss and absence, according to Derrida, distances himself from haptological metaphysics - a metaphysics of presence. This is possible due to the way Nancy writes philosophy. His philosophy is multiple, and unfolding, written as fragments, positing multiple demands on readers, providing no overarching unity, no singular history, asking questions of authorship, the arts, subjectivity, archiving, preserving, ontology. The notion, that I am *being-with* whilst wandering through landscape, undergirds Nancy’s argument and is irreducibly fragmentary in nature. I am a being-with, a singular-plural. Mitsein. Fragments. "I" does not come before "we", *Dasein* does not precede *Mitsein*, there is no existence without co-existence. It is a *renovated ontology of the body*. An ontology of bodies. ‘Body’ really means what is outside, insofar as it is outside, next to, against, nearby, with a(n) (other) body, from body to body, in dis-position (Nancy, 2000: 83-84): *Le Toucher!* Walking through landscape for Nancy is therefore a different experience, to the one written in early non-representational landscape geographies, landscape is:

'always the suspension of a passage, and this passage occurs as a separation, an emptying out of the scene or of being: not even a passage from one point to another, but the step of the opening itself... The walker steps, and his step becomes that of a compass, the angle and
amplitude of a disposition of space, on whose step - at whose threshold, at whose point of access - a gaze presents itself (Nancy, 2005:61).

If we say therefore, as Nancy has, that landscape is a ‘simultaneous opening-onto and distancing-from,’ a touch at distance, and dasein is replaced by mitsein, many more landscapes can be written, and much more landscaping can be done - if geographers take their cue from Nancy (Wylie, 2009: 277). And acknowledge this opening and distancing, stressing absence and presence (see Wylie, 2009, Dubow, 2011, for an articulation of absence, see also Rose, 2006 for a discussion of dreams of presence in geography).

To make it clear exactly what to expect from the following chapters, I am going to retell two ‘small stories’ about meeting poetry in landscape (Lorimer, 2003). One with Edward Thomas, re cycling the route of his book In Pursuit of Spring, and one walking with the Fellowship set up in his name, to perpetuate interest in the poems he wrote, and to preserve the landscape he knew; the Edward Thomas Fellowship. The stories are taken from the two major sections of this work: book 1 (Preamble: literary hitchhiking) and book 2 (In Pursuit of Spring: a recycling). These two extensive attempts at becoming a writer work with and against each other. They pry open poetry and place, in different ways by doing different things. The small stories provide an insight into the detective work undertaken, with Edward and others to date. Both are taken from wanderings about the semi-mythical south-country, that I have called Literary Hitchhiking. The style and form of my work is of the ilk of Edward Thomas - it was the only way to get at the issue at hand: to find out about poetry, and land writing, in practice, by becoming a writer, and eventually a poet. The argument being that creative non-fiction is an underused tool in human geography, and indeed all social sciences (see Taussig, 2006).
We resolved to set off by bicycle once we had established when spring had begun, or more accurately was about to begin. The plan was to then pursue it and witness the metamorphosis of the landscape and each other; the further we got along the preordained route. It was not until more than a month after a false spring had visited London though that we finally did agree to get going, in the second week of March. The ride was to be our first journey together of this kind. On the road for an extended period: out in the open countryside or weaving through dense traffic. Becoming companions, pen pals, so close it is now difficult to tell us apart. It remains to be seen what remains for a poet, a topographic writer, the subject, I, in this post-human world. Riding to the holiest of holy poetic sites from the capital seemed like a good way to find out what remnants there were. A journey along roads and lanes to the Quantock Hills - to Nether Stowey and Coleridge Cottage, Kilve, Crowcombe, and West Bagborough, via Guildford, Dunbridge, Salisbury Plain, Bradford-on-Avon, Trowbridge, The Avon, The Biss, The Frome, Shepton Mallet, and Bridgwater - *In Pursuit of Spring*. Edward becoming a bard on that bike.

It is necessary to go back prior to the visit of the false spring to begin with first though; to the days here and there, when we walked together, to the days spent walking with the *Fellowship*. To where it all started, with a desire to walk differently, oddly; questioning as we went what is poetic, a poem, representation in general. To the initial discovery of literary societies; the obsessive ones that wander the landscapes their literary hero held dear, incessantly, reinserting poetry and prose as they go. On these loops of the Downs, representation could actually be witnessed, felt, seen, heard, bumped into, and could therefore be researched like any other thing. Literature moored itself, detached itself, interacted with, reassembled and transformed the multiple places we travelled through. Becoming a part of the vitality of those places; affecting how we moved through them, manifesting itself as material compositions, as presentations in and of the world - not as representational imaginary, pattern, gaze, or construction overarching landscape (see Dewsbury *et al.*, 2002: 437). In the mêlée, place and literature mutually perform each other adding, dissolving, maintaining, circulating and deconstructing meaning, symbolism, identity; with the two being held in a porous process of intertwining, becoming, and disentangling (see Nancy, 2000, for an outline of his philosophy of the mêlée rather than the
mélange of place). The mêlée of things - representation included - going on, and moving about in the places we inhabit can be thought of as poetics. The thesis skews the line which separates the post-structuralist Deleuze writing *The Logic of Sense* (1969) and the phenomenological Bachelard writing *The Poetics of Space* (1958). These books resonate with each other. They share a common form; a series of paradoxes or dreams. They both pay attention to the architecture of the imagination, the event and the phantasm. And they are both advocates of poetics when it comes to understanding the places we inhabit and beyond. It was the redemptive qualities of poetics, in getting at the incomprehensible enchantment of everyday life and writing it, even if it made no sense - especially if it made no sense - which Bachelard and Deleuze found so appealing for society; from Lewis Carroll to Charles Baudelaire. Michel Foucault wrote in *Theatrum Philosophicum* (1970) that *The Logic of Sense* (1969) should be read as ‘the boldest and most insolent of metaphysical treatises… this is philosophy not as thought but as theatre - a theatre of mime with multiple, fugitive, and instantaneous scenes in which blind gestures signal to each other.’ *The Poetics of Space* (1958) shares this unfolding quality - a spirit of speculative endeavor, deconstructing the abstract rationales of the philosopher: a spirit I have tried to tap into throughout.

What happens on a hitchhike, is a sort of tagging along. I basically follow a society around a place, which their literary hero held dear until they have had enough or seen all there is to see. When we reach a spot where an event occurred, maybe a poem was written, we stop to undertake a ritual reading before moving on. This is then repeated until the loop is complete, or a pub is reached. A walk practicing poetry usually happens two or three times a year. The regular meets when they actively travel to and within a literary landscape are a vital part of this voluntary memorializing and the mutual enactment of literature and place - with the literature mediating, altering, and enhancing their experience of place and the place doing the same to the literature. Hitching a ride with such literary societies whom memorialize, preserve, and claim landscape in this way, through a form of ‘right’ or ‘correct’ walking - reasserting poetry as they go - turned out to be the perfect solution to my initial lack of poetic nous (see Ingold, 2004). I could witness their movements, garner their knowledge of poetry, monitor at poetic sites their

I have travelled with the *Edward Thomas Fellowship* on three birthday memorial loops, always in more or less the same direction. Whilst wandering with the *Fellowship,* my initial thought was to attempt to salvage, make present, record, memorialise, or preserve - pressing a narrative of ghostly presence into material and subsequently summoning, intertwining memory and place as if neither is in a state of flux, and presenting a whole memoryscape ignoring absence. As I wandered further however, following this well-worn path became less appealing. Remembering is a political act, endlessly performed, creating amongst other things, overarching ideas of (national) identity (see Young, 1993), and as such I wrote the events of the past as ultimately fractured, fleeting, and elusive, and only partly definable - confronting the endless fading away, and ‘emptying-out’ of meaning and memory in landscape, trying to ‘make visible this loss;’ to expose a certain irrecoverableness of history (Nancy, 2005; Dubow, 2011: 2). Evident, is a displacement of typical notions of time and space, and a questioning of subjectivity, thinking in terms of estrangement, loss, and haunting, ‘outside the unfolding locales of chronology’ (Dubow, 2011: 3). It is post-phenomenological, evocative of negative-phenomenology, synonymous with Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, and W.G Sebald. Lastly, this is not pastiche - wandering invokes a perception in me born of estrangement not dwelling - it is a serious engagement with a neglected art within geography, poetry, emphasising one of many possible creative responses to representations of landscape we can perform, by using ‘an oblique and attenuated form of practice’ (Wylie, 2009: 283). Recent work, post non-representational theory, on landscape, perception, embodiment (Ingold, 1993, Tilley, 1994, Edensor, 2000, Wylie, 2002, 2005), memory (Pile, 2002, Lorimer and McDonald, 2002, Lorimer, 2003, 2006, Jones, 2005,
Pearson, 2006), material culture, and the spectral (Cook et al, 2004, Tolia-Kelly, 2004, Till, 2005, Edensor, 2005, De Silvey, 2006, 2007) has pointed towards a use of creative non-fiction as a method of analysis: this is poetry as experience - an affective mapping, of more-than-human entanglements (entanglements with representation - witnessing a crumpling of time, place, and words). There is a certain disavowal of normative forms of collective remembering evident. Many of the dominant ghostly signatures, rhetorical and iconographic: the ghostly signatures that order our memories in space, the monumental memoryscapes, deathscapes, the Apollonian inclination to order, the fixing of authoritative meaning, in essence the singular simplified history, are all forgotten (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010). Heritage and museum spaces, trendy historic districts, the increasingly mediated social imaginary, and the construction of a specific memoryscape (Edward Thomas Country), explored expertly in much the same way by the Situationists, and Michel de Certeau, are re-critiqued, due to their all-pervasive, regulated, commodified, highly encoded, desensualised presence.

On the last stage of the last birthday loop, fields were thick with dandelion, and a small farmhouse was in view. It stood on the rise of a winding lane, in front of a bare slope, where the memorial stone sat. Juniper bushes, fir trees, and beeches banked a river of grass surrounding it. The yew tree by the gate of the house, where two cocker spaniels yapped at each other, once housed a gold crested wren. Edward Thomas, and his wife Helen, who became a writer after the death of her husband at war, moved to the house from Elses Farm, Kent, in 1908. It was their first house in Steep, East Hampshire. Wisteria and a thriving clematis, montana rubens, dangled from the house, as it seemed to at every house in the village. While May blossom delightfully sprayed flowers that arched from the trees like sea spume, as we gathered on the quiet road. The pantiles sunk the house, and made it seem as if the house had always been a part of the landscape; or at least a part of the landscape for longer than Edward and his poetry. It appeared to have been nailed together - the flint let into the pointing looked like nail heads. We pushed on, to the next reading point. Two Yew Tree Cottages: the final reading point of the day and the last house Edward and Helen and their children lived in together. This was to be the most creative period of his life. 130 of the 144 poems he wrote were written while he lived in the
house - although most were composed in the study atop his hill. Almost all were inspired by the
hills we walked. There was a plaque on the house. Poet: being enough to describe Edward
nowadays, in spite of the relatively small proportion of his life given over to writing poetry.
Another dark yew overhung the garden, along with a hedge of wild damsons, where a
nightingale sang once. Rosemary, thyme, lavender, bergamot, and old man, the herbs Edward
loved, still grew sporadically in the now overgrown little patch. We read his poem, Old Man, in
the place about which it was written, and gave the shrub a little rub, for good measure. Poem
and place united, crumpled together once more through the labour of the Fellowship, with the
idea of manufacturing some sort of sense of belonging whilst wandering the South Downs. A
shortcut to feeling present within a landscape: at one with it - well it may be figured as such.
The poem we read though had exactly the opposite affect. Old Man dislocated, disrupted place,
rendered it elusive; transporting us elsewhere. Poetry read in-place, the place which the poem
describes, is often poetry out of place - it was never really meant to be read as such. Uniting the
poem with the garden and the shrub was oddly disorientating. Typical Thomas to do such a
thing with his verse: his gift to poets since. Why are we reading it in-place then, placing it,
siting it? With the work of poets who lack this quality, I could understand this amalgamating
work - inside the site from which the poem was originally conceived. The poems of Edward
Thomas are in the main unhappy and tend to wriggle about, on their returning home. That is the
paradox of a literary walk. Yet this chalk seam is festooned with poems, and there are still more
to be found.

I rode along much of the chalk seam on the second day of cycling In Pursuit of Spring, skirting
its northern edge down the a31. Edward was off in the villages somewhere, noting their shape;
Holybourne was a parallelogram. An old lady quietly tended her flowers there. Edward sat by
her side scribbling down what they were; daffodils and primroses, arranged in jam jars. In
Alresford, Edward looked again in vain for something that bore the name of a poet: George
Wither this time - who praised the pond there. At the Church of St Mary the Virgin, a stained
glass window in the south transept, commemorates the lives of George Wither and Henry Perin.
It is of undecided age, so Edward could have missed it, and in the process the author of
Paralellogrammaton. Beside the pond, the first few lines of the poem, transcribed in full by Edward, were mumbled; eyes shooting from words to water. *For pleasant was the pool, and near it then Was neither rotten marsh nor boggy fen. It was not overgrown with boist’rous sedge, Nor grew there rudely along the edge A bending willow nor a prickly bush, Nor broad-leaf’d flag, nor reed, nor knotty rush; But here, well order’d, was a grove with bowers: There grassy plots set round about with flowers.* It was the first poetry reading completed in-place of the ride, *In Pursuit of Spring.* The uniting reaffirmed a sense of purpose within, to question the practice. Completing this particular commemorative service though, felt like giving something back to landscape - an offering of words from a poet; *whom we can connect with a district of England and often cannot sunder from it without harm.* In a critique of most literary societies, Edward went on to say something important about reading poetry in-place, with specific reference to Wither. *Many other poets are known to have resided for a long or a short time in certain places; but of these a great many did not obviously owe much to their surroundings, and some of those that did, like Wordsworth, possessed a creative power which made it unnecessary that the reader should see the places, whatever the railway companies may say. Wordsworth at his best is rarely a local poet, and his earth is an insubstantial fairy place. But if you know the pond at Alresford before this poem, you add a secondary but very real charm to Wither; while if you read the poem first, you are charmed, if at all, partly because you see that the pond exists, and you taste something of the human experience and affection which must precede the mention.* He ended his appraisal of literary tourism with a disappointed; *to have met the poet’s name here would have been to furbish the charm a little.* Edward, like Wither, would go on to become a poet who furbishes the charm of a specific village. The poems he created were local. They undoubtedly add to the moment of being there. But at the same time they disrupt, posing a brittle landscape that could disintegrate altogether. The leitmotifs of homelessness and absence haunt his earth: a shifting, fleeting, spectral place. The poems transport you elsewhere, as you initially taste something of the place as it was, and are then hit with a set of images of a dark place, prone to collapse. Edward again seems to occupy a middle ground. His is a joyful melancholia - at least on the page - that does more than mourn a wilderness gone, or the loss of countryside practices. He is not a transcendentalist parochial pastoral poet of place and
belonging, despite what we often think. His work does something odd and clever geographically. It is conscious of the distance between self and surroundings, of dislocation and unsettledness, something to which we can relate in a shifting mobile world - leading to a state of destitution for Edward. As a set of poems they demonstrate the problem with compartmentalizing poets without wandering through the landscape of their lives. It seems obvious to say that different poems do different things to landscape, and that not all strive to encourage a sense of belonging amongst wild nature. But Edward Thomas and his poems have been misread as doing exactly that. I wonder how many other poets are misread in the same way. This is ultimately what Literary Hitchhiking attends to. J.M Coetzee asked in Youth: Scenes from a Provincial Life II (2002), what happened to the ambitions of poets here in Britain? Have they not digested the news that Edward Thomas and his world are gone forever? It is not as simple as that.
Memorial Stone

“I am not taking a pilgrimage,” I said to myself when I visited the graveyard at Port Bou in the spring of 2002. Indeed I was not even sure I wanted to visit the graveyard. I do not think this was entirely due to fear of cemeteries on my part. Nor was it because I am also attracted to them. It was more because I feel uncomfortable about what I discern as an incipient cult around the site of Benjamin’s grave, as if the drama of his death, and of the holocaust, in general, is allowed to appropriate and overshadow the enigmatic power of his writing and the meaning of his life. Put bluntly, the death comes to mean more than the life. This cult is at once too sad and sentimental, too overdetermined an event - the border crossing that failed, the beauty of the place, the horror of the epoch. It really amounts to a type of gawking, I thought to myself, in place of informed respect, a cheap frill with a frisson of tragedy further enlivened by the calm and stupendous beauty of the landscape. In any event, one does not worship at the grave of great thinkers. But what then is the appropriate gesture? Death is an awkward business. And so is remembrance.’

(Walter Benjamin’s Grave, Michael Taussig)

09.11.11. Very early morning, Imperial War Museum archive. You are not allowed to take photographs. They are not going to be reproduced. You are not allowed to take photographs. Scribble it down on scraps of paper instead. Eyes clogged with sleep dust still, head a little fuzzy. There was stuff here that no one had ever bothered to look at. Why would anyone? A document about an Edward Thomas Centenary Memorial: signed in 1978 by Myfanwy Thomas, youngest daughter of the poet and writer Edward Thomas, Alec Guinness, famous actor and local resident, Jill Balcon, famous actress and local resident, and Douglas Sneglan, the then vicar of Steep - the village in East Hampshire, where a sarsen stone memorial was installed on a hill above in 1937. It will be the centenary of his death soon. The document began with a
quotation: *Steep on Tuesday, and for all I know ever after*. These words headed a letter written by Edward Thomas on July 21st, 1913 as he moved in to his third and last house in the village. He had just returned from a bike ride *In Pursuit of Spring*, a poetic undertaking out of the capital west, met little known American poet Robert Frost a matter of weeks earlier, who would tell him the pursuit springwards was a succession of poems and to begin writing poetry, and was about to learn of the First World War, in which he would soon be killed by a stray shell at the battle of Arras. Steep was to become, during his final four years, the centre of his spiralling world: the mainspring of his poetry. The pursuit of spring - from his childhood home - is often overlooked as an important milestone in his life. On it he finds the beginnings of his poetic voice. *In Pursuit of Spring* was first published in April 1914, following its writing up. By December 1914 Edward had written his first poem. Into the next two years he crammed all his verse writing. As the document in the *Imperial War Museum* archive said, most were written about Steep. In addition to the pursuit springwards, Edward had been walking rough-circles almost daily from home and back, since moving to the village. He abused notebooks on these loops. It was though the writing of *In Pursuit of Spring* that provided Edward with a greater understanding of the self. It also gives the reader an insight into his split psyche, his depressive illnesses. He writes down some of the demons that had been plaguing him, using the pursuit as a form of therapy. The pursuit itself lived on in his poems. Whole sections of prose from the pursuit were fashioned into haunting depictions of landscape. Landscape threatened by war and the relentless force of industrialisation. No one should write anything about themselves without first reading an Edward Thomas poem. The *Other Man* his doppelganger is a recurrent character; his other self, his nagging doubt. A slight on the lack of spiritual fulfilment the modern self has. He recurs again and again in his poems, and is first introduced in the book *In Pursuit of Spring*. Riding westward out of the capital was to be the start of his epically creative last four years.

The un-photographable a4 single sheet document confirmed that a memorial to mark the centenary of his birth - March 3rd 1978 - would be placed in Steep. To compliment the entire hillside above that had already been dedicated to the memory of Edward Thomas. He would be
in Steep, ever after. The hill has, since 1980 especially, become a site of pilgrimage. A literary society founded then - known as the Edward Thomas Fellowship - has grown up around the site. They repeat a birthday walk yearly, culminating in a site-reading by the inscribed stone. It has essentially become a grave where flowers and poems are left - his body though is buried in Agny Military Cemetery, north-east France, near where he was killed. Like the Walter Benjamin memorial in Port Bou, on the border between Spain and France; the Edward Thomas Memorial Stone is a fake grave, depending on how we classify a grave. In his non-pilgrimage to the site where Walter Benjamin took his own life, fleeing the Nazis, Michael Taussig (2006:4) writes: ‘When we get down to it, why trust that any grave contains what it’s supposed to? One of the most important events in life, namely, death, is so shrouded in secrecy and fear that most of us would never dare to check. Who knows what goes on up there in the graveyard of Port Bou? Maybe none of the graves have the right body, or any at all?’ I would add to that; why does it matter whether a grave contains bones? The body does not hold the remnants of who we are in death - does it even hold who we are in life? Edward Thomas is a very good example of the distributed self. In addition to the memorial stone above Steep, the Fellowship have drawn all over the village itself. Each of the three houses that he rented there has an oval plaque adorning its frontage. Edward Thomas Poet lived here. And opposite a war memorial with his name on, there are two lancet windows in the church representing his life. A life that has to an extent been reduced to a final few years: the years when he reached a creative tipping point, and began writing poetry at an astonishing rate. And to his death: his heroic death at war - a war which still haunts this quiet corner of East Hampshire. The cult is at once too sad, too sentimental (Taussig, 2006: 6). Oddly the house where he was born, 61 Shelgate Road, Clapham Junction, declares: London County Council EDWARD THOMAS 1878-1917 ESSAYIST AND POET lived here. The blue plaque marked his whole life -1878-1917 - not the years he dwelt in the house, telling also something of his previous life as an essayist. It was placed there not by the Edward Thomas Fellowship but by London County Council. The terraced house was just off Northcote Road - a strip of shops, bars, and restaurants where the middleclass mums go for lunch, and thirtysomethings drink white wine. Clapham is a typical old suburb of London. Well kept, expensive, and busy. Not somewhere Edward particularly
liked being brought up, hence why he moved to the little village of Steep. A village which has become an Edward Thomas theme village; as if all he ever was, was the local hero poet. And that poetry was something transcendental that simply flowed forth when he looped the place. Another poet of the same era, Thomas Sturge Moore, lived in the village but is forgotten mostly, overwritten by the memory-work of the *Edward Thomas Fellowship*. It is as if they have claimed the place for Edward Thomas - and all the place now is, is a memorial, a poem, an imaginary, thanks in part to their material reminders. Their name suggests so. *Fellowship* implies stewardship, ownership; guardians, protectors of the landscape. It suggests an older understanding of landscape, *landschaft*, shaped not by landscape painting and photography (see Olwig, 1996). But by stories and tales which distribute a territorial belonging, creating a sense of community - for those that are part of the cult. The village is cluttered with poems, now landmarks; festooned with bookmarks. They may have been forgotten sites without the mapping of a few intrepid members of a literary society.

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09.11.11. Afternoon, Steep, East Hampshire, in the traces of Edward Thomas again. This is not a pilgrimage - I kept telling myself. Simply a final act of remembrance in Steep - the first without the *Fellowship* present - on the way to somewhere I had resolved to visit, despite this supposedly not being a pilgrimage: the site of his death near Arras and his grave in Agny - a place where as of yet the *Fellowship* have left well alone. Unlike the memory-work the *Fellowship* do, this was going to be transient; in and out. A different way of memorialising: a creative remembering, and perhaps an ‘appropriate gesture’ (Taussig, 2006: 6). To get to Steep, I had driven along the start of the route ridden *In Pursuit of Spring*. The recycling re-considered
poetry and its relationship to place - post-Fellowship - following Edward through literature and landscape; emphasising the problem with elevating certain types of place over others. A pursuit of what Marion Shoard termed *Edgelands* (2002). Not in terms of what she and poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts delineate are *Edgelands* (2011) - a fluid rural-urban fringe. Though these messy bits of England have been ignored for too long - since the days of Richard Jefferies and the classic series of excursions, *Nature Near London* (1883) - as Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley have argued in their book celebrating jittery, jumbled, broken ground on the edges of cities: a *true wilderness*. Rather an idea of *Edgelands*, as all encompassing - all is *Edgelands*. The pursuit became an argument for the in-between. Noting down the in-betweeness - Edward/Me, We/I, City/Country, Society/Nature, Structure/Agency, Subjective/Objective, Subject/Object, Human/Non-Human, Person/Thing, Bachelard/Deleuze, Phenomenology/Post-Structuralism, Psychogeography/New Nature Writing, Life/Death, Imagination/Materiality, Northern/Southern, Rich/Poor, Old/Young, Here/Gone, Couple/Single. Replacing dower forms of remembrance. The challenge set by Mike Pearson in *Performing the Past* (2007). This final remembering though would take that diversion a step further. It would be the culmination of four years work. In which I traced the last four years of footprints left by Edward Thomas: it is in the end only a creative biography. What Edward produced was a historical materialism of bookmarks, of imagination, resurrecting Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the rest - a paper trail in the margins. And by the end he was reborn, just like flowers in spring. He is remembered herewith. Elegy though, is never enough (Lorimer, 2011).

Steep. The village is set around two streets at the base of the hill with the memorial stone atop. And another that runs along the ridge and leads to the stone. Two of the houses rented by Edward are below, one above. I began my intervention at the solitary pine. It was in a field alone beneath the pined ridge - the stone just about visible. It was never going to be as permanent a landmark as Ian Hamilton Finlay leaves - the concrete poet. Or the stone above. But that was not the affect that was needed. This was supposed to be a transient over-writing - embedding elements into the landscape for a short period for others to find. They should work with the writings already present, and together. And perhaps encourage a re-reading of the texts
associated with the place and even new experiences of place - covering the village with new words. The bits of paper attentive to the form and experience of walking in landscape were tucked under branches ready to be found, or to decompose before any finding - more like the work of Alec Finlay or Thomas A Clark. On the paper was a poem, entitled *End*. It was written about the solitary pine. I had found the solitary pine, written about in *No One So Much as You* - a poem by Edward Thomas - on my first meeting with a couple of members of the *Edward Thomas Fellowship*. It felt like an end; a gift to Edward.

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**End**

_The pit of my stomach fell out _
_at the sight of the solitary pine. _
_Seeing it alone, rooted, in the centre _
of a vast expanse of dusty green _
lit faded memories. They flashed _
as the pine loitered in my head _
bringing to an end the distant _
dream of redemption I had had._
From the solitary pine I drove to a pub. It was frequented on my third meeting with the Edward Thomas Fellowship. A rough-circle walk with a solitary member, called Doug. We had walked to the Chalk-Pit and back. The accidental amphitheatre had been written about by Edward in 1915. The seventeenth century pub called the Harrow Inn was a regular haunt of his. I wrote a poem after discussing the life of actor, local resident, and fan of poetry, Alec Guinness, with Doug - also a regular at the pub. It was not open for some reason but there were people inside. As I drove away after leaving the poem on a pub bench, someone came out to read it. They were bemused by the fly posting.

**Pub drunk**

It was a scruffier pub in his day;
set in the middle of the Hangers
winded around by vines
propping up the frontage,
inside a smoking room
and a variety of ales in barrels.

The toilets remained unchanged
on the opposite side of the lane -
a tarmac garden of sorts;
the endearing outdoor bogs
with a trough to piss in,
enclosed the dozen or so benches
in crumbling brick structures.

Greengage, apple, mulberry, and fir trees
were spotted with delphiniums, poppies,
everlasting-sweet peas, roses and dahlias.
While in a shady corner campanula,
phlox, and allium grew.
The solitude of this spot
meant he never moved far.

One would see whilst walking
him always sat here drinking -
the last time he was pottering around
all stooped over with a head of white hair.
Not long after this visit he passed away -
his wife died too a few months later;
she would walk the dog this way
to fetch him back home.
It was time to head up to the common site of pilgrimage - the memorial stone that looked down on the village. I drove back out of the village, past *The Aspens* and the two houses with their plaques. The road twisted uphill through a pine forest. A deep coombe was beneath, *The Path, The Mill-Water* and *A Tale* down there. I parked beside *The New-House* and walked the rest of the way. The view came in installments, until I reached the stone; out from beneath the canopy.

Michael Taussig (2006: 6) and his words still haunted what I was doing:

‘This cult is at once too sad and too sentimental, too overdetermined an event - the border crossing that failed, the beauty of the place, the horror of the epoch. It really amounts to a type of gawking, I thought to myself, in place of informed respect, a cheap thrill with the frission of tragedy further enlivened by the calm and stupendous beauty of the landscape. The beauty of the place, the horror of the epoch.’

Driving from the memorial stone to his actual grave; I still wasn’t sure whether that was a good idea. Or whether it was a tracing too far, to follow Edward to war, and in a sense bring war back to this place. When I got to the stone though, I realized that the war was never going to go away. There was a poppy stuck under the octagonal plaque, on the face of the sarsen stone, and some flowers had been left. So I got about my business of remembering. And left another poem - this time for no one but Edward - but in all likelihood one of the *Fellowship*. I slipped under the flowers a poem written about the hillside - Edward’s Hill - called *Gazing*. I had written it, again, after my walk with Doug, when we had stared from this spot.

**Gazing**

*A narrow chalk path aslant; ascending
not directly over the crest like in the past,
via the sparkling shards of willow pattern plate
but up a shallow slope hung above a patch of pine,
on the side of the hanger amongst dense beech.*
A short cut facing out to sea; climbing at pace the natural staircase jutting from the sheer scarp face, a slippage of faults in soft porous rock.

Erosion of the cliffs over Petersfield, selfsame strata dive down to the sea at Dover dug away at through the toil of wind and water, this southern most band of calcium carbonate.

On the landing a smooth plateau; a sweep of the head from right to left, sixty miles of sands and clays in an instant.

Eye now racing from the rising tide to a suicide; the tormented Woolf hearing voices fills pockets full of stones and drowns herself.

A statue marks the spot of death, a pilgrimage site for a brisk mourning walk, throw yourself into the river in a macabre homage to a prominent member of the Bloomsbury set

and not to forget, Algernon Charles Swinburne past those smooth-swelling unending downs, on the south coast walking the line ignoring those grey seaside towns.
After canvassing the village, cluttering it with representation, I drove to two other famous sites nearby. The first was the green lane. Edward had written a poem about it in late 1916. He was just about be given some leave. During which he returned to 13 Rusham Road, Clapham, over Christmas to see his family, before shipping out to France. He only wrote two more poems after that. I left there the first poem I ever wrote. It was written after finding a dead mole with Colin and Larry; two members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship that I first met in summer 2008 - and the start of the bookmarking, the affective mapping; chasing footprints, dowsing energy fields, across poetic lay lines, between ancient sites.

Mole

*Water had gathered in the deep trenches where wheels had passed over for centuries, down the narrow treacherous green lane.*

*Drenched cheap trainers began digging at my feet leaving me looking down more often to concentrate, I noticed when slowing and studying my gait on the ground a dead mole face up arms outstretched; there was not a scratch upon it.*

*Its heart stopped from a fright, a loud noise, perhaps a blast from a gun. Bending down I reached for the mole and stroked the fur on its belly, before picking it up. It was not larger than my palm; touching it I was surprised at its warmth and its softness. Not long since it had gone.*
I would drive to 13 Rusham Road, in the traces of Edward, after doing one final thing - the last thing in a landscape that I had spent four years looping. From the green lane I drove past the pub with no name - about which Edward wrote his first poem - to the Manor Farm. It is the site of a poem, written by Edward in 1914. It is of all his poems the one where the poem does seem to ‘furbish the charm’ of the place (Thomas, 1914: 100). The poem is also the most idyllic of all his poems - the ‘rural idyll.’ And you really can imagine him coming here again and again, writing the perfect poem. Before walking over to the farm, yew, and church, I left a description of a meeting. The first meeting with the group of people who work tirelessly to preserve his memory. There is an old phone box there. Inside it, in the shadow of the manor farm I left, A Meeting. This place, on that first meeting with it, held no connection with my psyche. Now, in the part of the brain where psychology and topology meet, it coaxes vast forlorn horizons, monumental emptiness, whole mournful memoryscapes. This is why identity as being simply your roots, where you are from, is a divisive fantasy. It pre-constructs the self, and traps the individual. Cosmopolitanism is the enemy of nationalism, regionalism - the impossible possibility of rootlessness.

A Meeting

A literary society
bent on revering a poet
the forgotten chap of words
worried me a little.

After ten minutes or so
two gentlemen arrived
sporting suitable attire,
carrying poems and an explorer map.

Dressed in gear,
which was less shiny than I imagined;
woollen socks, corduroy trousers, leather boots, tweed cap.
The cagoule was bagged.

A blue aluminium stick was on show
jutting from a hand,
indicating that I had not driven through time
but the Downs of Southern England.
There was a story that I was told on my first meeting with the Fellowship, by Colin. It was the story of why Edward went to war - he was over the age of conscription. The story is often regaled on the Edward Thomas Fellowship birthday walks; memorial-loops. Edward was asked by his good friend Eleanor Farjeon why he wanted to go to war and what he was fighting for. Edward replied by scooping up some earth, crumbling it in his hand, and sprinkling it out. Literally for this, he said. It is this story that I have always been fascinated by, as his body was never returned to the soil he crumbled. The final thing that I was going to take from this landscape was some soil. And transport it to Agny, and his grave. The ancient yew he wrote of so beautifully, had been in the landscape for centuries before Edward, and would be there centuries after. From beneath it I took a handful of earth.
The Manor Farm

The rock-like mud unfroze a little and rills
Ran and sparkled down each side of the road
Under the catkins wagging in the hedge.
But earth would have her sleep out, spite of the sun;
Nor did I value that thin gilding beam
More than a pretty February thing
Till I came down to the old Manor Farm,
And church and yew-tree opposite, in age
Its equals and in size. The church and yew
And farmhouse slept in a Sunday silentness.
The air raised not a straw. The steep farm roof,
With tiles duskily glowing, entertained
The mid-day sun, and up and down the roof
White pigeons nestled. There was no sound but one.
Three cart-horses were looking over a gate
Drowsily through their forelocks, swishing their tails
Against a fly, a solitary fly.

The Winter’s cheek flushed as if he had drained
Spring, Summer, and Autumn at a draught
And smiled quietly. But ’twas not Winter --
Rather a season of bliss unchangeable
Awakened from farm and church where it had lain
Safe under tile and thatch for ages since
This England, Old already, was called Merry.
Grave

*When you are standing at your hero's grave,*

*Or near some homeless village where he died,*

*Remember, through your heart's rekindling pride,*

*The German soldiers who were loyal and brave.*

*Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done;*

*And you have nourished hatred harsh and blind.*

*But in that Golgotha perhaps you’ll find*

*The mothers of the men who killed your son.*

*(Reconciliation, Siegfried Sassoon)*

‘Every story is a travel story - a spatial practice.’

*(The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau)*

11.11.11. Odd singularity; cosmic portal transit date - poetic lay-lines eminent, particularly on this date of remembrance. Trekking from 15 (formerly 13) Rusham Road across the Channel - Southampton to Le Havre by boat, ending up in the flat, flat land of north-east France. Gravelines: the name of the first place in France off the boat, and also the titular name of this final tracing - a death drive from the memorial village, and his poems, to the grave, and on to the grave of Wilfred Owen: a transportation of earth, nature, poetry - earth-growth itself (see Lorimer, 2008). I was glad it was nearly all over. It needed to come to an end. I wanted to be myself again, remove Edward: a part of me since summer 2008. The death drive had become apparent over the four years in the traces of Edward. How can it be a form of therapy to write down experiences? You end up never really feeling, or confronting, anything. Instead look
down on a version of yourself moving about places. Emotions are prevented from being fully understood and bad times are never gotten over. They are instead, as if by magic, turned to prose. Or, even worse, bad times are manufactured, in order to become muted prose. It is cyclical.
Mud, cloying mud, beneath a dreary sky: nothing else for miles. As if a giant rotavator had passed over the whole landscape, chopping everything up. These were the famous fields; nowhere to hide. Dug into the land are trenches - some left open, like an open wound: for memory’s sake. There were no wild poppies - not even they can survive modern farming techniques. Arras had two squares. Around which cafes noised. Middle-aged Americans were heard through the din. Here to re-visit the war: dark tourism - a fine line between curiosity and gorging. They spoke of memorabilia - old guns, ammunition, medals. And sites of interest. A parade passed by. I had to get out of the open. It was too busy. Heading in the car to Beaurains instead. It was seemingly just a through-place to somewhere else - flanking a single road for half a mile on leaving Arras. There was no mention of Edward in the place he died. The observation post was nowhere to be found. You go through a field and down the back of a garage to get to the graveyard. It backs on to a street of grey houses - put there at a later date. Agny was small but it was difficult to find - hidden away, intimate. The feel of the place was a monument to death in itself. Cold scrubland: a wonderful behindness to the scene. I remembered the triumphant memorial stone at Steep - surveying all before it.
Graveyard, cemetery: peaceful. In contradistinction to the path leading to it; it was neat, ordered. Mist clung to the cherry trees around about. They *bend over and are shedding On the old road where all that are passed are dead*. Stones stood in numbered lines, facing a single large cross. Roots and branches encroached and overhung; as if nature was trying to take the space back. It was a deadly silent little patch of earth. Row C Grave 43, was through the only entrance and off to the right. The site mimicked the epic silence that fell, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918. When after four years of fighting, The Great War was finally over. Lest we forget: how we remember. Bits of poetry were inscribed on gravestones. Most taken from the end of *An Ode to Remembrance*:

*They went with songs to the battle, they were young,*  
*Straight of limb, true of eyes, steady and aglow,*  
*They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,*  
*They fell with their faces to the foe.*  
*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:*  
*Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.*  
*At the going down of the sun and in the morning,*  
*We will remember them.*
And there it was. Before me: the stone I had been searching for. Second Lieutenant P.E. Thomas, Royal Garrison Artillery, 9th April 1917, Poet. The grave next door sadly had written on it: A Soldier of the Great War, Known unto God. It made the non-pilgrimage seem silly and ridiculous. Although I did feel a strange sense of an ending, a giving up of memories, of the past; knowing what was about to happen. On the grave I had come to pay my respects to, were previous signs of homage. Grass was slightly worn directly in front of it. And it was the only grave in the cemetery with something left at its base. There was a weathered piece of paper with a poem written on it, a photograph of Adlestrop train station - closed in 1966: a bench is now all that is left, with a plaque on it that quotes the famous poem - and a couple of poppies:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.
The poem scribbled on the decaying paper was poignant. Someone who knew of Edward well had left it. It was not a famous poem like, *Adlestrop* - always included in best loved poems anthologies. Rather an obscure one, that has recently become the title of a new biography. The final three stanzas were written down, although the last one had been taken by the rain and wind:

*Now all roads lead to France*
*And heavy is the tread*
*Of the living; but the dead*
*Returning lightly dance:*

*Whatever the road bring*
*To me or take from me,*
*They keep me company*
*With their pattering,*

*Crowding the solitude*
*Of the loops over the downs*
*Hushing the roar of the towns*
*And their brief multitude.*
It is impossible to better that as an ending. So I sprinkled the soil from beneath the yew, and patted it down - reuniting Edward with the soil of England: a collapse of self and world impossible in life, achieved in death.

Before leaving I wanted to know something of the other dead buried in the graveyard. A register was held neatly inside a gate post. It explained: The cemetery contains 408 commonwealth burials of the First World War, 118 of them unidentified, and 5 German graves. It was begun by French troops, and used by Commonwealth units and field ambulances from March 1916 to June 1917. Two further burials were made in April 1918. And in 1923-24, 123 graves were brought in from battlefields east of Arras. The original 40 French graves have since been removed. A visitor’s book was attached to the register. Most comments were about Edward Thomas. Here is some of them: I came from Spain to visit Edward Thomas, one of the greatest poets England has given, RIP / I remember Adlestrop / To honour all those brave men and to find Edward Thomas / Remembering Edward Thomas, English Lit graduate and researcher of the poet / Ex Lincoln College remembering Edward Thomas / Visiting the poet P.E. Thomas,
thank you and all your comrades / In honour of all those who died and fought, and Edward
Thomas / Visiting poet Edward Thomas whose poetry I admire, and which sustained me when
sad / Peaceful beautiful place, remembering Philip Edward Thomas and other World War One
heroes / Beautiful place, well cared for, very moving - I remember Adlestrop / We came to find
Edward Thomas / Re-read ‘As the team’s head brass...’ wonderful poem, RIP Edward Thomas /
Edward Thomas, All roads lead to France / Came to see Edward Thomas’ grave, RIP. From
there I drove away - my attempt to forget, through a final remembering, failed - to the grave side
of another member of the Artists’ Rifles, Wilfred Owen: the poet who robbed war of its last
shred of glory. Unlike the poems of the period the monuments shamefully lack the nerve to
project the awful purpose of themselves. They are a betrayal of the dead: victims of an
incapacity, this century, to devise a commemorative mode - a century that, more than any other,
needed such a mode. Most memorials are inimical to meditative remembrance. They
purposefully forget, wipe over, sanitise history. The stones of Arras: pilgrimage.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

(Anthem for Doomed Youth, Wilfred Owen)
SECOND LIEUTENANT
P. E. THOMAS
ROYAL GARRISON ARTILLERY
9TH. APRIL 1917

UBIQUE
QUO FAS ET GLORIA DICUNT
Preamble

Literary Hitchhiking

‘A sense of what might have been lost, and what we can’t have, hangs about every neatly pencilled enquiry form, and each question politely asked about the extent of records kept. These simple actions cast a ghostly projection of our collective relationship to the archive. But the pain of loss is something different altogether, because the dead can’t be brought to life. Things most precious, personal effects and trace elements, are what remain. They are everything there is, and are never enough. For this reason - and for all the grace, economy and eloquence shown - elegy will be forever inadequate.’

(For Merle, and the late Mr Jim Patchett, Hayden Lorimer)

‘I was born to be a ghost.’

(Letters, Edward Thomas)
Kotor: a vertical walk

‘But the fact is that writing is the only way in which I am able to cope with the memories which overwhelm me so frequently and so unexpectedly. If they remained locked away, they would become heavier and heavier as time went on, so that in the end I would succumb under their mounting weight. Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in some way blind us to life... And yet what would we be without memory? We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere never-ending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past. How wretched this life of ours is! - So full of false conceits, so futile, that it is little more than the shadow of the chimeras loosed by memory. My sense of estrangement is becoming more and more dreadful.’

(The Rings of Saturn, W.G Sebald)

Accepting autobiographical convention, this is a very brief history of events leading up to my first meeting with a literary society, in the wild. I am writing this only a few months after splitting from my girlfriend. And as such, it has become an attempt to leave behind misery, weariness, everything feeling dead, an attempt to quantify the past somehow and apologise, without sentimentalising history. Travelling back in the main to one afternoon of walking in particular, completed only a few days prior to my initial contact with the original literary society; The Edward Thomas Fellowship. It was so strange that it was still fresh in my mind whilst out wandering with them the following weekend - along with something that I tried to keep under wraps, which I will begin by stating here: I am not a walker, well not in the rambling outdoorsy sense. Like everyone else I dislike being cold and damp and never learnt, or got taught how to walk in such a way; how to appreciate the great national parks like a poet. To
clarify: I had probably been for about twenty real countryside walks in my whole life, before the summer of 2008. Of these twenty walks, the majority were with my parents in the Lake District. Even then, most of the day would be spent staring through the car window, sat in a twee little coffee shop leafing through guide books, or on occasion stood beside a lake, usually Windermere, admiring the view out across the great literary landscape - Wordsworth, Beatrix Potter, Wainwright and their texts mutually encountering, enacting, unsettling, transforming, interacting, inventing and reinventing the Lakes for a kid from a cotton town. Thinking back now, going for a walk as a child actually involved very little opportunity to stretch my legs. At most we would walk for a few hundred metres, taking two or three hours to do so - once you include a refreshment stop. Planned walking routes which looped over hills and through trees, were very rare. I vaguely recall a moany walk which gave on to a beach somewhere. It was a line walk of roughly a mile, climbing a knot and descending to the sea. Beyond that memory fails me. I am assured though by my parents that we walked reasonable distances on occasion. When I left school, as is common, these excursions ended altogether. Leaving me all alone with some guide books, stories and poems, to crack the country code and find out how to walk vast landscapes properly. Needless to say, there was no attempt made to do so and venture rural. I resolved not to leave the safe confines of the city again, in order to walk. And have never owned a cagoule, or some walking boots, or a stick. I did not need to in Manchester. A city haunted by its faded past. The place where it all began: smog, chimneys, factories; industrialisation, capitalism. Remnants still exist: a shock of red brick here and there, a few canals, a number of now renovated mills and a number of ruins in Castlefield and Ancoats, and the imposing civic architecture along Oxford Road and Deansgate. While south of the city centre are Rusholme, Fallowfield, Didsbury, Levenshulme, Burnage, and Longsight and rows and rows of terraced housing. And beyond the concrete collar, the orbital motorway, sits Hulme, cut off from the city for years. The Arndale still squats hideously over Market Street too. More or less the Manchester W.G Sebald witnessed, all lurking behind the recently fitted stone and glass facade. Derelict industrial Edgelands, ruins, ignored meadows, guerrilla forests, the city parks, urban nature, found via ginnels, back streets, buildings, culverts, tunnels, and canals, as I criss-crossed the city on foot: stitching my psyche to its fabric. Places dotted around the city where I would
go for bits of time: houses, pubs, lecture theatres, benches, restaurants, clubs, squares, buses, libraries, cafes, shops, bars etc. Usual haunts. There was one walk beyond the city though from that period, which I can remember well. The only walk forever enshrined in my memory. It happened a few months before I moved down south. And I was on holiday in Montenegro with my then girlfriend, who had also participated in the no rambling rule despite being from walking stock - her great grandfather was a pivotal member of a noble body of scholarly and cheerful pedestrians: The Order of the Sunday Tramps.

Montenegro. I had booked us in to the Hippo Hostel, Budva, for ten nights - about seven more than everybody else staying there. It was cheap and we had the only private room in the plain white building. Inside the room was squeezed a narrow hard bed with a chrome fan as its face. The shower room, shared by forty or so people, was opposite, and a quiet, still, little garden, which you had to climb down and in to from the road. I spent a whole day there once, lazing beneath the flowering vines, reading the W.G Sebald book, Vertigo, whilst my then girlfriend, C, read Kafka. The quiescence played with the range of fleeting memories written delightfully and the next day the book was taken on a trip to the world heritage sight, Kotor, with us. It was safely stowed in the pink eastpack - a monkey key ring dangling and guarding the zips - whilst we rattled along on the humid old bus watching the landscape slide by. It took about an hour to get there, winding along possibly the most picturesque road in Europe; skirting the edge of the Bay of Kotor, beneath sheer limestone cliffs. It was familiar scenery, reminding of a youth spent driving around the Lakes. That did not stop it from being an epic and entirely different experience though. The sun helped, causing the vast bowl to glisten and blind, distancing thoughts of Cumbria. As soon as the bus pulled in at the ruin of a bus station in the old town - desperate to cool down - we walked directly to the water and jumped off a thin stretch of boardwalk, into the crystal clear fjord like river canyon, being more comfortable wild swimming than rambling; my body seemingly evolved to a life aquatic, free to dive down to the rocky bed visible deep below, before coming up for air. Others mirrored my movements. We all then floated for a while on our backs in the freshwater, like a wreath of lily pads, looking up at the mysterious castle. It appeared unreachable and inaccessible for tourists. C broke the silence
and splashed me a few times. She wanted to climb up to the castle that we were all inadvertently focused on. I was not so keen, it would be a hopeless pursuit; turned away at the gate no doubt. C swam in though adamant that we should go and transfixed her gaze on the narrow path, zigzagging upwards. Towelling off in the shallows she once again implored me to walk up to the medieval fortress. I paddled out but only rested for a while on the shingle, pretending to read a little more of *Vertigo* - my mind though was on the cloud castle. Sitting and looking up into the heavens, we were drawn on to our feet simultaneously; we must give it a go, hangover or no hangover. The tip of the tower miles up above and the tiny flag fluttered proudly, beckoning us forth. There was no harm in seeing whether we could pass the gate in the old town, at the base of the mountain. It was midday and the sun was baking our faces, so we stocked up on loads of water - weighing the pink bag down - before attempting to sneak in.

Of course, at the gate was a sign telling us to buy a ticket, otherwise we were not to go any further. Unfortunately, finding out where to buy a ticket from, proved difficult. We wandered back into town thinking we must have missed the booth and eventually resorted to asking somebody. It turned out to be just beyond the sign itself, slightly further up the great never ending steps. A lady sat on one of the thousands of steps in the shade of a tree, a few metres below a little chapel, selling tickets. She spoke very good English and in no time at all we were on route up the mountain. With a large yellow ticket in hand, should we get stopped around the bend. A perfect line of poplar trees focused the eye forward, dead ahead, to the chapel the lady guarded. The path - flanked by a low banister of stone - was at this point wide enough to walk side by side, and talk of the increasingly spectacular view of the fjord from round the next zig or zag. We chose to walk on the rough gravel, rather than up the steps, as the slope was quite shallow, completely comfortable in the intense heat; walking hither and thither across it with ease, taking lots of photos - I have the photos somewhere but I don’t want to look at them just yet, they will only send me into a familiar state of melancholia. We were scooting along nicely, up the mountain side, taking hairpin bend after hairpin bend at a fair old rate, and enjoying the sublime scene laid out before us - monumental mountains, pretty old town, clear fjord, and clear sky - when we stumbled upon the beginnings of the fortress, despite being still hundreds of feet
beneath what appeared to be it. A number of half ruined stone walls converged, creating a succession of roofless cubes. We looked inside them all. In the last was a rectangular opening, it allowed us to peer over the edge at another little church. This one was in the middle of a field and had beardy horned goats guarding it, ably supported by hopping bunnies. It was the rabbit hole. The field and church had no right to be there. We were ascending a slanting staircase carved into the side of a mountain. It made no sense. Something had gone to pot with my internal bearings. A sense of disbelief at what we were seeing, so surprising was it: acres and acres of fine grazing land just appearing out of nowhere - a hidden plateau as smooth as a bowling green or the baize of a snooker table. The church was a lot further away than it seemed. C did not come down with me. I continued instead alone, with C and the hole getting smaller and smaller for a few minutes. Goats began to surround, it was all getting a bit weird. The church could house anything, or anyone, and it was no closer than when at the gateway peering in. On turning back, C was no longer stood in the opening. The dark rectangle was the only feature on the great grey wall before me, aiming for that, quickly, leaving the church and goats behind. It took some effort to reach the opening with a hand.

Back on the path, C was snapping away at the fjord unaware of the surreal experience. Water was necessary; gulping the liquid down provided scant relief from the sun, which had now been searing our scalps for almost two hours. We discussed giving up and going back down but the flag still beckoned us; two ships in the night drawn on to the rocks, seemingly not much further at that point. So we continued to climb the zigzagging path, coming across more and more bizarre walls spreading out like the roots of a tree holding the mountainside in place. The higher we climbed the narrower the path became. And it had no banister or steps at all by then, forcing us to straddle the limestone at times. Worried that C would fall off and crash to her death before my eyes - leaving me to find her smashed carcass at the bottom two hours later - I resorted to telling her about every single rock on the path; an arduous and dizzying task in itself, bringing on attacks of vertigo. On each bend we would stop to take on the drips of water left from our two large bottles. By then we were making incredibly slow progress; baby steps were a necessity at that altitude for novices. The path felt like it was never going to end, and we could
continue forever, zigzagging all the way to space. But it did. All things always come to an end.

It was an odd ending though. The path did not stop its zigzagging. In fact it carried on, twenty or thirty feet above us, ascending into the clouds. But we could not follow this thread any further; we had exhausted its connective possibilities. Downhill was the only way from here. The flag was at eye level though, along with an extensive fort; releasing the child within me. I played war for a bit, ducking and diving in and out of empty rooms, pretending to shoot C. Until the sun overcame me and I had to sit in the shade, massively dehydrated and bright red. C took a photo of me. We then took another photo with the flag behind us, our big faces covering the landscape, the only people for miles; gazing out at the fjord, now so far beneath us. Wordsworth would have appreciated the vast view out across the water, arced by jagged mountains, scraping the bluest sky - and Kotor looking like utopia from up high. C brought me a cold fizzy fanta. Where had she magiced that up from? Of course, it turned out, as I found out later, that there was a Montenegrin up there in the castle. He had lugged a huge drinks cooler up the side of a mountain, in order to sell drinks to the plucky tourists who made it all the way. The pink bag had felt like a fridge. How we descended the staircase to the old town is a mystery. It was all a bit of a blur and was over quickly - everything crashing down around. I had managed to get mild sunstroke mixed with waves of vertigo. Maybe I was carried down by the drinks man inside his cooler, or laid across the backs of that herd of beardy horned goats. Or maybe none of the story told happened at all, and we just sat beside the fjord all day reading our books, and sipping on cool refreshing bottles of nikšičko pivo; after all I am not a walker.
Preston, January 2010
Steep: a dot to dot walk

‘The world that revealed itself in the book and the book itself were never, at any price to be divided. So with each book its content, too, its world, was palpably there, at hand. But, equally, this content and world transfigured every part of the book. They burned within it, blazed from it... until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder... and while our walking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock, as is the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images.’

(A Berlin Chronicle, Walter Benjamin)

Some people say that simply the colour green is relaxing. If only you could get in touch with nature you could touch creativity. Unfortunately I don’t see colour like most people, so there has to be more to it than that - why people feel at one with, alive, in the moment, free. Colour is not something that can be described well by me. It is written only because I know the sky is blue, and the grass is green. It is to me, like Deleuze and Guattari say in, A Thousand Plateaus, a manner of speaking - it is nice to speak like everyone else, even though I actually see the world differently; or pretty much the same, but I am unable to describe what I see. I do not have a feeling of blue, my brain doesn’t know it is blue. I do not feel blue as a colour in-itself, but blue like this or blue like that - I make connections; the sea, or the sky. I wouldn’t though know I had a problem if people hadn’t told me I had one. I have always wondered why I simply cannot know colour. I see it sort of, but I do not know it. It is like not knowing left from right. I like the colour grey perhaps exactly for this reason. I like concrete. I know the colour grey and I can tell you it is grey because I know it is - well most of the time anyway. I can do black and white too, mostly. Anything in between half the time I will guess wrong. This may be why I am
not very fond of the rolling English countryside. I like the grey concrete city. The Edgelands: the jittery, jumbled concrete droplets of space. I guess what I am trying to say is that fields and hills were always associated with a problem for me - being predominantly red, green, brown colour blind. All those browns and greens, in autumn all those reds. I do not automatically feel at one like most. Green does not calm. I perhaps see the thing in-itself more than most. The colour, the signifier, is lost on me. It is not one of the first things that pops in to my head when I see something. One less initial thing to think about: to take me away from the thing. I struggle to dwell in a forest - everything usually blurs into one, into confusion that I attempt in vain to make sense of. The world is a series of tones, shades, dark and light. I bought a purple bobble hat the other day thinking it was blue. It reminded me of the time that I painted the sky purple when I was seven. It covered the top half of a mural that the whole class had been painting. The teacher made me feel stupid. How could I not know something so fundamental? I have since found out the sky is not actually blue. We are duped into thinking it is. Everyone in the classroom laughed at me. And nobody stopped me until I had almost finished. It went round the whole school that I could only see in monochrome like a cat. Who is the stupid one now? The sky is empty. A void. Like most of the world. Just empty space. I am a weirdo. But the whole world is also weird. Why do we not see that?

*

This is an account of my first walk in the official English countryside since childhood - walking whilst at the same time searching for poems. Days spent Literary Hitchhiking began here, walking dot to dot, poem to poem: it was high summer 2008, less than a week after the vertical walk in the epic Kotor. The route taken links a number of poems by a single poet together - creating a dense loop of poetics. It was my first poetic hike of this kind; a whistle-stop tour of the poetic-sites associated with or shaped by Edward Thomas. There was a new poem around every corner, as the landscape was flooded with poetry, by way of an introduction to the poet,
via two members of *The Edward Thomas Fellowship*. I struggle now to remember much of the car journey, bar the route taken. It was early in the morning and warm. The drive itself though has been wiped from my memory, usurped by more recent drives to the same place. Driving that day must have been pretty automatic. With myself and the car affected only by the ebb and flow of traffic. All that is left in my memory - perhaps for the reason that I wanted to write exactly this - is a vision of a version of myself, sat in the car, on a nothing stretch of road. I recall being anxious about meeting some members of a literary society bent on revering a poet, with only a basic grasp of poetry to hand: Wordsworth essentially. As for Thomas, I knew virtually nothing about him: *Adlestrop* and *The Manor Farm* - poetic scratches on the surface of his life. Time appeared to be going slower, the faster I drove. It was not until a few miles from Petersfield that landscape and road began to have some sort of connection. As the road followed what appeared to the untrained eye to be ancient folds and gashes in the land. It twisted and dipped increasingly, hanging on to, following and bridging a shallow meandering stream. Road and stream were knitting the landscape up, as a generic array of things slid past: field, hedgerow, field, hedgerow, field, hedgerow, green, brown, green, brown, green, brown, bisected by sky, blue, blue, blue, clouds, wispy white, crows, black swoops, a gap, five bar gate, oak tree, standing alone, one in every field, cow, cow, cow, side on, unmoving. The road descended rapidly into darkness at a copse. And turns became tighter and tighter to mediate for a slant in the land. While shadows danced on the car in front, as we bunched, and the dashboard lit up. A bright white light inundated my retina on leaving the copse. Petersfield Railway Station was on the left: the meeting place. I parked there and waited. After ten minutes or so, two gentlemen arrived sporting suitable attire, carrying a book of poems and an explorer map. Dressed in gear, which was less shiny than I had imagined. Woollen socks, corduroy trousers, leather boots, tweed cap. The cagoule was bagged; an aluminium stick was on show, jutting from a hand, indicating that I had not driven through time, but the Downs of Southern England.

The men stopped by the awkward automatic door of the old stone station. It opened and quickly closed unsurely. The bearded man was Colin - the honorary secretary of the *Fellowship* - and the one wearing a flat cap and carrying the aluminium stick was Larry - the honorary treasurer
and membership secretary. I remember being struck throughout by a feeling of estrangement -
despite being in a homely, safe landscape - aiding a little communion with Edward Thomas,
wandering with the two members for five or six hours. They were staunch Edward Thomas
enthusiasts, frustrated that he was not a household name, like many of his run of the mill
contemporaries. This corner of Hampshire provides the ground base to the majority of his
poems. It is known as Little Switzerland locally. On the map we pored over it said Steep. The
disciplined walk was so focused around Edward Thomas that at times the landscape felt
unnecessary, a distraction from the poetry. The landscape became more noticeable at
designated stopping points, where the scene unfurled itself, and we strained to get a better view. Or when
the poetry told us to see and we tried to glimpse the past. We often stopped and pondered the
poem in the place it was written almost a century earlier, before reading it aloud. The landscape
is still apparently as it was, time has slowed down, but I was unable to substantiate this, merely
picture. The poetry has according to Colin and Larry, preserved the landscape and given it blue-
plaque status, national importance; a narrative, which was largely unreadable to me. When we
were not talking about poetry, I was versed in the history of The Edward Thomas Fellowship,
Edward Thomas, his life, and his heroic death in the First World War. Colin spoke of how, on
the morning of Easter day 1917, a stray shell blast stopped his heart and left not a scratch upon
him - he was 39; the sombre landscape of the Arras offensive in North Eastern France is still
haunting this quiet corner of East Hampshire, interrupting, displacing/dislocating, and merging
different times and places, from Adlestrop to Arras. There was a letter found in his pocket when
he died, with a diary, and a photograph of his wife. Written in the diary is a story of a shell
landing beside Edward a day before his death. It did not explode. At Steep Church there is a
memorial to the dead of the Great War. Inscribed on the wall of the church were the names of
the men who perished in the trenches. Edward Thomas is one of the names in a list of around a
hundred people from this small village. A sombre reminder of the great loss suffered before a
walk in the footsteps of a great poet. A lost generation of heroes, of which Edward was one,
memorialised here. It is perhaps the best way to begin Literary Hitchhiking, by beginning at the
end. You get a sense of where the hero ends up; the culmination of their great life. Of course,
explained Colin, Edward did not need to go to war. He was over the age of conscription.
Reading the words, *For King and Country*, prompted Colin to question the devotion of Edward, to a monarch. Not so much King but certainly country, he went on to say. What followed, from Colin, is the most repeated story about Edward. And, along with his writing, is part of the reason why he is held in such high regard, by the people who wander this landscape regularly. It is the story of why Edward went to war. A friend, Eleanor Farjeon, asked why he was going to fight. Edward bent down, picked up a handful of earth, crumbled it between his fingers, and replied, *literally for this*. I think he was defending a way of life too, said Colin. A story then not of nationalism, but of preservation, gaining mythical status within a new band of brothers: the *Fellowship*. Edward essentially believed he had cherished England thoughtlessly, visually, slavishly. Fighting was necessary in order to look again, uniformly, at the English landscape. He wrote poems still once enlisted; all but one written whilst training in England. Whilst other poets of the period produced verse verging on nationalist manifesto, Edward continued writing what he knew - the English landscape: a landscape now more disturbing than ever. Colin told me, it had been suggested by some, that Edward knew he would be killed at war, and that he welcomed death. Death was a final solution to the melancholy suffered as a man and a writer. It enabled the fusion of self and world - impossible in life - strived for by the poet.

Leaving the church through a gate cocooned in a wooden arch, we turned left past *Bedales School*. Students from the school were wandering around the impressive grounds. The glass entrance hall was filled with sculptures and two large leather couches. No one of authority was around. The students seemed to own the place, free to do as they please. They were carrying books and instruments. Edward sent his children to *Bedales* unwontedly and did not agree with the teachers on occasion. Nor did he agree with the elitist education system in place at the time. He preferred to align himself with the working class, according to Colin, which comes through in the subject matter of his poetry. Edward often spoke with the peasant worker, the farmer, the mill-worker, the ploughman, and the quarry man on his many excursions. These conversations were later in his life written up into poems. He was not a wealthy man himself, despite writing all his life. And would not have been able to afford the fees to send his children to *Bedales* and subsequently to university today. It was still a necessity for him to do hack work, as he called it,
to pay the bills. This would irritate any writer and lead to his depression. Eventually, writing review after review became an unsatisfying existence for a man who had essentially always wanted to be a poet. To emphasise the struggle for money Edward faced, Colin and Larry, walked me across the road to number 2 Yew Tree Cottage. The cottage is set back from the road, down a narrow path, flanked by hardy hedges. The small white semi-detached cottage was the third and last house Edward rented in the area. He lived there with his wife Helen and their three children from 1913-1916 - the time when the majority of his poems were created. Edward could not afford to buy in the area, even then, which is why they rented. Luckily on occasion he was moved by what he saw in the village and would be able to write about it, which is why they stayed. One such example of this is in front of the house, a large shrub, old man, or lad’s-love. The feathery shrub, which we rubbed on our hands, gave off a pungent scent. Myfanwy, would pick at the bush every time she walked in and out of the house. Her father, Edward, was guilty of doing exactly the same; on one occasion when he mislaid his key, being transported Only to an avenue, dark, nameless, without end, at the smell of the herb. Before we left the garden a ritual reading of the poem Old Man took place and we rubbed our hands on the leaves once more. The smell wafted up from my hands into my nostrils. The words began to play with the scent. And I was transported somewhere else by it. The poem modestly and clearly transcribed trying to remember. It was a beautiful example of a poet using simple words to say something profound. As when the childhood memory wanted was not filed away ready simply to be remembered, feelings of estrangement grew. It illustrates the slippery nature of memory. Important memories can be lost. Unimportant ones retained. We may remember one day but not the next. Memories change over time too. I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing; Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait For what I should, yet never can, remember; No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush Of Lad’s-love, or Old Man, no child beside, Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate; Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

Not far from 2 Yew Tree Cottage is the Cricketers Pub. The pub stands on a cross roads; the entrance to the village. We waited in the empty tarmac square in front of the pub for a few
moments. Across the road from where we were standing was a garage. The shape, brick and age of the building suggested it was a stop off point in the past. It was actually a blacksmith’s cavern and a little shop. The sounds of the pub and the smithy, glass and anvil, would have been clinking away all day, for half a century before even Edward moved here. Now there is no clinking left. The pub is nowhere near as lively as a pub should be. And the garage was silent. It at least had people working inside it though, but not today. We were left with only one noise above the distant hum of the a3; *The Aspens*. Blowing about in the wind they talk together Of rain, until their last leaves fall from the top, as they did in the days when Edward walked this route. We turned back on ourselves away from the talking trees to another memorial. This time it was a marble column with a wreath of poppies placed carefully at the base. Once again we looked for the name of Edward Thomas. It was about half way up. We stood for a few moments, to pay our respects before turning left towards a cast iron bench, painted cream, looking out across fields where the rich kept their horses. We sat on the pretty bench, encircled by the Shoulder of Mutton in the distance and watched the horses prance - tails swishing side to side in unison. Their little white shoes amused me. These were no ordinary horses. They were new to his area. Immigrants. As such they altered the vista from this little cream cast iron bench we sat on. The Fellowship had no problem with the elegant prancing horses. Some of the ramblers and locals did though. Colin told me of how he had been approached by some local group to argue that because the site had special literary significance it should not be changed in any way. This includes allowing the stables to erect fences across the sloping fields. They had a petition with some names on and were ready to turf the horses off the land. Colin laughed at the ridiculousness of the story. The horses are still here, happily. Blissfully ignorant. They won their case for asylum and cockily strut about. Much to the annoyance of the locals and killjoy ramblers. We wandered down an anonymous lane past the field of horses, towards the Shoulder of Mutton. Gazing up at it, it looked more like a leg of mutton. The ghosts are up there, to be summoned. Visions of Edward running down the shoulder with Myfanwy on his shoulders were abounding. This was a common sight. Collective memories it seems, of the once witnessed. There was a repeated excited noise from my fellow hitchhikers who were perceiving fading markers in the landscape. A water-mill: *where once men had a workplace and a home*. Traces of
what it once was remain. Whilst the waterfall still flows, the mill and wheel are no longer there - not enough demand to turn a profit. The mill had given way to a large detached property, in keeping with the rest of the village. Ruins were a common sight even in the days of Edward, as people began to move out of the area to London and Southampton. Edward felt a duty to write poetry about their fleeting existence. But could not alter the fact that the world was becoming increasingly mechanised. Mass industry was coming. In the silence of the Downs, the waterfall roared away. It is useless now though, castrated, powering nothing, *idly foaming*. Pity thought the three of us, as we imagined it in its heyday, with workers clocking in. No trace of them remains; the site has returned to nature, who adds *flowers here and there*. We read *The Mill-Water* in homage to what was left, and left.

Climbing upwards past the waterfall through Lutcombe Bottom following the river, eventually led us to a small crystal clear lake surrounded by trees. It had no right to be there amongst the deep coombe. It looked artificial. There were a number of interlinked pools, a small waterfall, and a bathing area on the shallow side. It reminded me of a Thomas Hardy novel, of wealthy Victorian landowners creating their own water supply and boating lakes to take in the health
giving properties of water. This was not too far from the truth, as it happened. Lord Horder owned all of the lakes at one time. Giving all the land to the country of Great Britain under the care of Hampshire County Council only a few years ago - this should have allowed the area to become a part of the proposed South Downs National Park. But to control the saplings through coppicing is labour consuming. And it would very quickly fall apart. The area around Steep was therefore drawn around for maintenance reasons and sat for a while outside the boundary line of the new National Park. This was still a strange decision though; it appeared picturesque enough to be included and is a part of the South Downs. The decision has since been reversed.

Beyond the lake system was a chalk track about ten feet in width. It led us up steeply in to some trees. Water ran down the chalk eroding away the surface, revealing the past in tiny rivulet. The story of a lady who dropped a box of blue plates on the path we walked was regaled; smashed fragments still sparkle against the white rock, just, and tell the tale. The wood cutters cottage had gone bar footings, leaving the path redundant, going nowhere but to a clasp of trees. Nettles grow making visible what once was. I picked up a blue shard but later lost it, it disappeared into emptiness, swallowed by landscape - trampled back down to be found again next year or the
year after. Luckily the event is immortalised in verse by the poem: *A Tale* - a tale through which
to see this coombe. Memories fixed in space. The shards continue to be found a century after the
event. It must have been a large box. When they eventually are all gone, the site will lose the
enchantment with which it held us. This prompted Colin to ponder dropping another box of
willow pattern plates. It was the authenticity of the story and the site, which made it special.
There was no plaque. No staging of the past. It was not being sold to us as a heritage. We read
oddly two versions of the poem - Edward could not decide on which one was best - before
walking up the chalk hill and out of the trees. The deep coombe, dark and wet, was now below
us. Fern and wild garlic almost covered the bracken completely. We had walked up a narrow
path along the eastern edge of what now appeared to us as a large valley. The path narrowed
further the higher we climbed Stoner Hill. Little steps had been cut into the chalk and mud to
allow the ascent to be done upright. I was unsure whether they had been ground down by the
feet of people over centuries or had been dug away by a single person. To my left on the edge of
the steep drop was an embankment of moss, under which could have been anything. It served
well as a banister rail. The blue aluminium stick was now a useful appendage. We stopped and
leafed through the book of poems to the poem: *The Path*. I presumed that this must be the path
Edward wrote about. The one we had just used to climb the hillside. It runs along a bank and
there is a precipitous wood below. It was not though. For many years people had walked to this
site and read the poem, without realising it was the wrong path. There was another, which has
gone to the winding prickles of bramble branches. Left to return to nature. Unused for so long
by humans. It went nowhere but to the top of the deep coombe. Stopping suddenly at the edge
where the trees end. It overhung us by thirty feet or so. A vista before the trees topped it
perhaps. An old lady remembered the path though, the one which *led to some legendary or
fancied place*. We tried to find the entrance to the secret path. Cockshott Lane though was now
a tarmac ribbon, which extended across almost the full length of the Shoulder of Mutton. Some
of the path was covered over because of this. We could see some smaller trees and a line of
nettles. I walked into the trees a little further to gain a better view. But only succeeded in getting
myself entangled. The entrance to the path was now locked. I wondered whether the path was as
thickly covered with prickly branches beyond the part we could see. And hoped there was an
area at the end of the path left untouched by the workers - the bramble and the nettle - where you could still stand and look over the edge, down at the deep coombe and dream of diving over the parapet. The aspens will catch you. If not the damp ground would at least soften your fall. Darkest days spent looking in to the darkest deepest ancient coombe. Stare for too long and you will get vertigo and go.

The route we took from Stoner Hill must have been unremarkable as I am struggling to remember any of it. We turned left and on to a busy b road towards Froxfield. The road winded around the opposite side of the coombe. It looked like a great driving road. It also looked like I imagine Switzerland to be. Fir trees and steep hills. We followed the busy road for a while leaving Little Switzerland behind. I remember the road widened, straightened, and descended. There was a pub at the lowest point of the road on the right. It was bright blue and looked old. The road then ascended again. For the first time on the walk I could see for miles in every direction across fields of corn and barley. North Downs clear behind, south clear before. I wonder whether to trust what I am now writing. Perhaps the more I think and re-think these sentences the further away from the original memory I am getting. There was definitely a succession of turns, all along narrow straight lanes. We passed a farm with a metal five bar gate. There was a cow trough and cow pat but no cows. A big dark blue barrel type object. A tractor. The ground had been concreted. I think I can remember a ploughed field. There were some quad bikes over the hedgerow out of sight. The sound was piercing. Nothing was said. We left a lane and crossed one of the many freshly ploughed corn fields. In front of us was a meadow with a town in the distance that I am unable to remember the name of. It had something to do with either Ivor Gurney or Richard Jefferies. The pub with no name was on the other side of the meadow. I have no idea of the route we took to reach the meadow. My memories of the meadow are a little more vivid. No doubt because I have a point of poetic reference: the pub. Images flash now and again of a view over towards the pub with no name.

Ignoring the previous paragraph where I lost myself: we somehow walked from the secret path to a pub with no name. Once inside the pub we were confronted by a stick and boots belonging to Edward Thomas; material reminders, resonances, traces. This was his favourite haunt,
apparently. The pub was dark and cool. It was also very nice. There was a wedding party in. The bride squeezed past our sweating dirty bodies propping up the bar in order to reach the door. She was still in her flowing white gown. A line of people followed her until we were the only people left in the pub except the bar staff. I ordered a pint of no name bitter. Larry tried the no name strong bitter. It was a lot darker and clung to the glass as he tipped it down his throat. We sat for a while to rest. I began to relay what had just happened in my head of the lost journey. My hay fever had become uncontrollable, allowing me to concentrate on nothing else but my body. This must have wiped my memory of what we had been discussing. I could remember only the basics of the landscape we wandered through to reach the pub; a green corn field, barbed wire fence, a line of trees in the distance, a desire path. I had followed it out of the green blur, embarrassed at the extent of my sneezing, embarrassed at the affect pollen has upon me. Sitting there now in a local country pub, I began to feel like a city boy more than ever; too clean, not used to the pungent country air, completely out of place. And longed to be back in the warm beating heart of natal Manchester, with its grey concrete and red brick. While feeling more and more dreadful in the countryside, sneezing away and folding the one tissue I had this way and that, my companions looked increasingly at home, their tensions were visibly seeping away. We walked over to the stick and boots and stared. Quality pieces of kit even now. The stick was a perfect fit for the hand of Edward. Carved from one thick branch of holly. The leather boots still looked useable, and were about my size. The corporeal techniques Larry and Colin employed seemingly began working whilst sat near the artefacts that once belonged to Edward. Some sort of mystical connection with Edward was being awakened. They talked of him and stared deep into the things left in the corner of his pub. It seemed as if they were attempting metamorphosis. Colin reaching for the stick, and a world beyond this life, transmogrified before me, becoming a strange new modern Edward.

No one else had grazed any of the anonymous lanes with us. Even the cows, sheep, and wild horses had gone. No doubt to make way for the very modest influx of cagouled ramblers we had not witnessed jostling with the ghosts of place. Outside the pub there is a large pond. It lies only a few strides from the door. I had not noticed it when we entered the pub with my face inside a
tissue. Lilly pads floated on its surface and reminded me of Kotor. Grass surrounded its gently sloping sides. Rushes growing around the edge merged the water further with the bank. It is difficult to see where the pond begins. A sign notes this along with the depth of the water. Ignoring the sign, a single cow stood at the water’s edge, eating the lush grass. On the other side of the pond from us were a few pub benches. The sort of benches which remind me of childhood sat eating salt and vinegar crisps and drinking syrupy coke. On these benches the Fellowship used to sit each year to write a huge birthday card for Edward. Colin has kept all of the cards and looks back through them occasionally to remember the names and faces of the people who sadly no longer make the walks. The wind picked up as we walked away from the pub in order to take a photograph. In my view now was the pub in its entirety, and the pond - very little else. This was a rather isolated local. A public-house that is public for birds, squirrels and such-like. An outpost up in the wind, as Edward noted in his very first poem - a long poem describing the pub. In it there is also a tale about a bar-maid with a cockney accent. It is very conversational, simple poem, written in a low-key tone. This was to become his style.

With a pint of no name bitter sloshing around inside me, I regained some composure and cheeriness. Sneezing abated we began walking down a narrow sunken lane, with trees on either side casting shadows on the shiny damp tarmac; we aimed for The Manor Farm with the sound of Larry’s stick staining the immense silence. A bright light at the end of the dark tunnel, opened out and gave onto a scene, which seemed uncannily like I had been there before. The power of representation perhaps, or the quintessential village green, or maybe I had been here before, it felt homely, comforting; a large, grand farm-house, a small church, a great yew tree, cross-roads, signpost, and post-box, all in the misty haze of a late summer day. Everything was incredibly silent and still. Wandering away from the others, I opened the wooden gate of the little church and walked beneath the great yew tree, opposites in size and age then and now. I could still hear nothing, wandering amongst the old crumbling grave stones, no voices, no birds, no wind, indeed no life bar my crunching soles. Turning to leave the church yard with its overgrown grass, brambles, ivy, and that great yew, I looked over the hedge and at the manor farm and knew exactly what Edward meant. This England, old already, was called merry. Yes,
perhaps this place is in, as the poet writes, a perpetual season of bliss unchangeable, slept in Sunday silentness! Upon which a car drove past and the spell was broken with a splutter. Disappointed I walked back through the gate, underneath the yew tree, now less enchanting, and met Colin and Larry once more who were still reading the poem aloud beside the farm.

To reach the memorial stone, we had to travel down a halcyon green lane, where now September hides herself, which seemed endless in its density. A tunnel of green, with deep trenches a couple of metres apart where wheels had passed over for centuries; no doubt deepened since Edward wrote the poem: The Lane. Some water had gathered in the trenches making it difficult to walk along the narrow lane and the cheap trainers that had been digging at my feet all day were now drenched. I toyed with the idea of taking them off but thought better of it. Instead I was looking down more often to concentrate, slowing, and studying my gait, not bothering to look over the top of the sharp hedges of holly. In doing so I noticed a dead mole on the ground, face up with arms outstretched. There was not a scratch on it. Its heart stopped from a fright, a loud noise, perhaps a blast from a gun. Colin bent down, reached for the mole, and stroked the fur on its belly, before picking it up. It was not larger than his palm; touching it I was surprised at its warmth and its softness. Not long since it had gone. The end of the long, narrow, straight, arduous lane, felt like the gateway to another world. I could now see cars shooting past and the fleeting fusion of self and world in pain was over.

With only gratitude instead of love a pine in solitude cradling a dove. With only gratitude instead of love a pine in solitude cradling a dove. Colin was looking over at a solitary pine in a corn field. Breaking out of a day dream I acknowledged Colin and his repeated excited statement. The pine looked lonely in the centre of a vast expanse of dusty green: a dot on the horizon. Colin explained how the pine was written about in the love poem, No One so Much as You, by Edward. Colin knew the significance of the pine, even if no one else did, making it a special tree, symbolising his connection to this landscape. I had witnessed personal knowledge of the landscape we wandered - an example of individual place-making. We stood and waited for a moment in silence, and then Colin read the whole poem aloud. The sad words of a dying love drifted on the breeze. Expertly delivered, in an accent befitting the poet himself, Colin read
the final lines: *That I could not return, All that you gave, And could not ever burn, With the love you have.* The words were now cradled by the pine not a dove. Colin returned to the solitary pine year on year with the rest of the *Fellowship* for the birthday-walk. A line of people waiting to be shown the next poetic-site, wander past the pine. Larry and Colin always stop and look at the pine. I wanted to get a photograph of it. But struggled to make the pine look as solitary as it actually is. Colin said he can feel the other members of the *Fellowship* watching him whenever he wanders over to the pine, wondering what they had missed, doubting their detective-work. I got closer to the pine becoming as solitary as it and imagined a line of people watching on. The words from, *No One so Much as You*, stream back now as I write and I am back under the pine - stuck in a metaphor of my own life. I had done too little too late. Never again am I going to be late. Never again will I see my best mate. Lost love flashes and burns, as I see the lonely tree and only dissipates once I remove it from my thoughts, and fell the solitary pine. I know how my melancholia came to be; it is still unclear, however, who the poem is about. It could be his wife Helen, or his mother, we will never be sure. The solitary pine loiters in my head sometimes: alone, rooted, and lonely, it lights faded memories and brings to an end any distant dreams of redemption.
An imposing house peering over the edge of a steep hill down Cockshott Lane: inscribed on the side of it were the words, *Edward Thomas poet and his wife Helen lived here 1909-1913*. The *Fellowship* had organised the hanging of this plaque and took great pride in it, as a material celebration of his work and life. Colin explained that Edward hated the house. A story of him leaving the house late at night during a storm with a gun was eagerly regaled. Helen saw Edward leave with the gun. A shot rang out moments later across the fields through the gloom. She heard the shot from the house and feared the worse. Edward was particularly depressed during this period. An hour after hearing the shot Edward returned with the gun in his hand. On cue the weather began to change, mist descended and the wind began to moan in the trees, who were seemingly talking to each other. Still feeling a sense of dread after hearing the previous depressing poem I wanted to get a move on. Not before reading a poem about the house, *The New House*, upon hearing which my sense of dread became deeper. I heard distorted by the wind: *Nights of storm, days of mist, without end; Sad days when the sun shone in vain: Old griefs and griefs not yet begun*. Then it was over. End of a poem, end of the loop almost. We had only one more thing to see on this whistle-stop tour: the memorial stone, which has sat on the Shoulder of Mutton since 1937, when the hill itself was dedicated to the memory of Edward Thomas.

Walking past Old Litten Lane, we reached the pinnacle of the dot to dot loop: the Shoulder of Mutton Hill. A name, which until the *Fellowship* petitioned the Ordinance Survey, was not on the map. It had been replaced by a newer name with less history and no residue. The hill dedicated to Edward Thomas needs to have a name, which the poet himself would remember. The landscape unfurled itself and the memorial stone could be seen stood about 30 feet in front of us, looking solid, almost human like in its qualities, surveying the landscape imperiously. With trepidation due to the steep slope and the incoming gusts, I walked slowly and carefully towards it with Colin and Larry following a pace or two behind. Stopping next to the memorial stone, I looked out with Edward over the South Downs. Colin and Larry did the same. It was a while before anyone said anything. After what seemed like an age, I turned to look at the inscription on the memorial. Written on the octagonal plaque set into the hard sarsen stone was:
And then I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey. Colin explained that this is taken from an essay written by Edward. How true it felt to me and my aching body, dressed in inappropriate, wet, clinging, painful clothing at that moment. Peering deep into the stone, silently staring, Colin placed a hand upon its shoulder and lent for a while in thought. After a minute or so he began describing the difficult task of erecting the stone in 1937. The story involved winches, a couple of film stars, a wealthy land owner, family members, lifelong friends, Rowland and Cherry Watson, and a team of people to remove it from Avebury, where it once stood in a sacred sarsen stone circle. The spot henceforth was a place of pilgrimage. Each year the Fellowship come to pay their respects. A poem has been written about the stone, but I forget who by. Edward would like the fact that the stone has mystical inclinations attached to it, as he liked to think of a world beyond the world we know. The eroding memory-prompt silently stared back at us before we broke its gaze and turned around to look over the landscape once more.

Still gazing across the Downs, Larry began to regale a story of an elderly member of the Fellowship. Not being able to quite remember a name, I was told and shown with actions, how he rolled head over heels down the hill regaining his footing occasionally, and only stopping once at the wooden fence about twenty feet below. The gentleman was fine but did not attempt the entire walk again. Colin was laughing loudly by this point and was also joining in with the actions where appropriate. Subsequently he told a similar story involving his grandson and himself and of course Edward and Myfanwy who used to hurtle down this very hill. Before we descended the vertiginous escarpment following in the footsteps of Edward and Myfanwy, we passed a bench looking out over the 60 miles of downs. The bench had written on it: In memory of Rowland and Cherry Watson whose enthusiasm led to the dedication of the Memorial to Edward Thomas in 1937. I stopped there for a moment letting the others wander on and sat with the dead on Edward’s Hill, looking out through the gloom thinking sad is the parting thou make me remember. What an elaborate suicide note these poems have seemingly turned out to be. The smashed fragments still sparkle Edward you mirror of England, you father of all of us. And then
I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey, pondering what could have been had his life not been cut tragically short.

Exeter, February 2010.
The manor farm: a walk poem

‘The simple lack of her is more to me than others’ presence.’

(Letters, Edward Thomas)

I don’t know whether to tell you this. It isn’t really a story worth telling. It is not interesting in any way, but it happened. The reason for including it is that I am trying not to omit anything. Inevitably though some memories will get written and some will not. It is the way memory work, prose-poetry, life-writing, storytelling, and Literary Hitchhiking happens. Here goes then.

A week after meeting Colin and Larry, I had another go at a loop around Steep. I was supposed to be meeting four or five members of the Fellowship. Colin said they were writers who took a particular interest in Edward. They were to tell me of the link between Edward and the peripatetic writers who influenced him. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Thoreau, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Emerson, Jefferies et al. Whose footprints can be seen scattered about his writing. The walk was to take place early in the morning and I was to meet them at the same place I met Colin and Larry. The railway station. Getting there was hard work, I seem to remember. I had to wrench myself from the peaceful surroundings of the New Forest and drive to Southampton initially, before getting on the m3. The morning sun was already streaming through the tent and I could hear footsteps and voices in the vicinity. No doubt descending on the shower block to beat the morning rush before I had chance. Bacon being cooked on a camp stove wafted over my way as I unzipped the flap of door. Rubbing my eyes I recall slowly piecing things together. I had slept in my clothes. They were now grimy. And I had drank a lot judging by the lack of saliva. Passed out, no doubt. C lay next to me inside a sleeping bag, looking beautiful in no makeup. Serene in the bright light now dropping through the opening. A fresh faced English rose. The way I will always remember her. She had not been stirred from her sleep, so I left her to her dreams and exited quietly. Trawling back through these halcyon care free days for this is thoroughly
depressing. The image of her lying there contently perforates incessantly; a thousand daggers entering my eyes. My life seems to be stuck in an endless hangover where her sweet laughter squeezes the temples. Maybe I should try to forget her and auld lang syne. I stumbled into a sort of porch area of an orange and green house tent, and saw the extent of the debauchery. I remember it seemed as if a few days had elapsed between going to sleep and waking up. In reality it can’t have been more than a few hours. Beyond the large windows of the Georgian inspired facade were scorch marks, empties, fag ends, playing cards strewn, and deck chairs in a huddle; fencing off the mess. All the remnants of my life at this moment, in a single scene. Increment by increment. Carnage followed by decay. The modern-day drug-fuelled binge in a tea cup. A cup of rancid ash in the end. Me down, further and further, deeper and deeper, to a T. Rather than facing the hell of screaming kids and pushy parents I opted for the hose ten feet away. This did at least remove the sheen of gear from my eyes enabling me to drive. I made it to the car without incident and started the engine, spoiling the naturalness of the morning chorus. To make amends the tyres made a wonderful crackling sound on the gravel as I slowly weaved around the shockingly bright tents. Up ahead a few stumpy horses were blocking the exit but parted gracefully as the car got nearer. At the end of the lane was the busy road, which carves through Ashurst. I followed this until reaching a roundabout. Beyond the roundabout memory recedes with road to nothingness. I got lost somewhere around Southampton docks. Big ships, tall things, heavy industry, water, told me it was a dock. Getting lost is at least a memory of the journey. I couldn’t say how I became not lost, or how I found my way on to the correct road even. I remember knowing I was now late and becoming flustered and then being on the a-road to Petersfield. The scar of pointless m3 must have plucked me from Southampton and plonked me there. Anonymously diverting me through important historical land. I saw something on the a272 that I had not seen the time before. It had not been there the previous week. Well the arm-chair cut into the landscape had been. A quarry of some description now given back to nature, or a very interesting geomorphological event involving ice. Just not the hundreds of people now packed into it. There was a large black stage at the base of the steep curve, facing the crowd. I had a good view from up on the road. Driving slowly due to the bottleneck and looking down to my left. I could hear some muffled noise. But most of the sound was kept in. It seemed like
decent enough music to me. Kind of folky, or minimal house. A broad range there I realise. It could have been anything really, I could only hear the bass. It didn’t last for long. Around the next corner the repetitive beat had gone. I was over and behind one of the arms. Probably why the organisers chose the site. Along with the fact it was stunningly impressive, in the way that the cliff shoots up and arches around the stage. As the road straightened I passed camper van after camper van, either parked or driving in the opposite direction. I was envious of them. A loop around Steep with a bunch of writers was certainly more strenuous than sitting in the sun watching a band. Still it had to be done, if I was going to pad out the idea of *Literary Hitchhiking*. I had to tramp the foot beaten paths and talk of the connection between walking and writing, poetry and paths. And track the self across this landscape. Even if I did feel like death. The poetic fault or lay lines of the semi-mythical *South-Country* would have to wait for another day. Do a bit of writing at each poetic site, noticing my journeying self as Edward did, and it will be a job well done. Writing the waiting and the inevitable walking soon thereafter. And hopefully I would be back in the New Forest in time for chippy tea. Gone again. And I’d turned into a giant chip driving in a basket of bubbling hot fat.

I was late to arrive at the station. I drove to the end of the long thin car park and back again. Rays of sunshine were visible against the pale aged tarmac. Along with dust and heat waves. This did not help when trying to locate my hitch. I repeated the same loop of the car park. No one was here, just empty cars. At least I thought they were empty. There could have been someone in them. White light shining off windscreen after windscreen pierced through to my retina and back, leaving a white spot in the top left of my vision that I struggled to shake off. It was a good point at which to stop and park. Removing my legs from the car proved difficult. Swinging one round and out was easy. The left leg was not budging. I had to rest for a few moments and look for the elusive writers whilst still lent against my hot car. They were nowhere to be seen. An invisible writer is not a common sight. Visible is what every writer seems to want to be. But not a soul was about. No one stirred on the silent platforms. No one left and no one came. No train, seen or heard. Just cast iron railings running as far as my whitened vision could see. Inside the little old station there was at least some sign of life, a couple. The ticket
machine, same as always, was giving them trouble. Nobody was there to help, either them, or me. And no sticks, boots, flat caps, maps in sight. I waited in the small room for a while. Dazed by the bright plastics sitting what seemed in perfect contradistinction to the grey facade. Leaflets advertised walks in the Downs. None mentioned Edward. Or any form of literary walking. Hardly surprising really, the visual landscape for the tourist speaks for itself. Picturesque notions of distancing abound. The viewer, gazing out across the vista eventually to the horizon and the limit of sight. Take a photo and move on. Between shots, exercise. A therapeutic wandering had between points on a map. Walking mediated. Technology, body, and landscape incessantly interacting. I struggled through the excessive print for a while longer. Still no poetry. Not a line of the stuff. It seems as if poetry gets in the way for the rambler. Messes things up, rather than adding to it. I was happy with this. Leave the ramblers to bump in to the poetry. And drown at birth the lines of tourists waiting to walk an Edward Thomas Trail. Before bombing a constructed fictional bounded realm of Edward. Insert Thomas Country below the Petersfield sign, and the overbearing lens through which to see the South Downs encases you indefinitely. I am encased. There is no known cure. Lodged in some dark corner of my brain are the words of Edward. They wriggle forward and dance before me when they feel like doing so. More so when I am in the Downs. I cannot control it. These representations are now firmly fixed in my vision of the place I was about to loop. Thanks Colin and Larry. Needed, one lobotomy detaching the representational from the real.

The last thing I needed was to talk about Edward for a day. Maybe they had not come because they knew how ill I was feeling. I had waited for half an hour now. Milling about by the entrance. They must have left thinking I had decided not to bother. I was only 15 minutes late though. I remember thinking that it was all my fault. I should have got their phone numbers. Or at least asked for their names. Panicking I paced up and down the car park. Still no one was around. Nobody would leave after a quarter of an hour of waiting surely. They knew I had a long journey. I decided to walk a bit further. I went towards the town centre. Now there were people. A steep length of pavementless road extending as far as the high street. There was no point in walking to the end of it. I imagined that it gave on to a quaint row of shops, all
regimented in grey stone. A pretty old market town. I returned to the station entrance, for what reason I do not know. They were not going to be there, I knew that. It was out of desperation more than anything. Like scrabbling around in the bottom of a rucksack you know is empty. I gave up and walked off back to the car. I was not too bothered; it meant I would definitely be back in the New Forest on time. The clock in the car said 11:15. The writers were supposed to be at the station by 10:00.

Did they not want to meet me? I am not the bearer of bad news. A young upstart telling them that I just don’t get this sort of middle ground poetry, sat in the cold comfort of the Georgian in between. I hoped they did not worry that anyway. I was not about to tell them that Edward had had his day and we needed to move on to imagism or modernism, or something else. Or, what can a poet say about our rubbish modern life, obsessed with targets, incentives, outcomes. With no room for flowery language. Only team building exercises. And pointless, thankless, tasks.

The station suddenly felt very grim. A place for the undead. Removed of all the ghosts, which I needed to walk. Removed of the person who was born to be a ghost, Edward. To get out of here as quickly as possible was the only option. Not before I had rang Colin though. He would put my mind at rest. Reinsert those comforting ghostly figures, Edward and the other Dymock poets, into my psyche. They had wriggled away completely, it seemed. I hated waiting. Waiting was the anti-everything to this project. Floundering in a sea of real people. That were not even at the station as they had said. Bloody biographers. The documentarians of life, not the livers of it. Cataloguing sense without feeling it. A life in words shorn of sensation. As if to compound the slippage of history from my thoughts, I reached an answer phone. This is the... End this now. Colin, there is nobody here. I have waited and waited. It may be all my fault but I am not sure. Ring me back on... I turned the engine on and drove away from the increasingly doomed theory of the Poetics of Space. Poetry is almost dead. The death knell tolled here back in the 60s. By the 80s the yuppie reaper came and swung loads a money, and a massive mobile phone at heads. Whatever I did beyond this moment could not resuscitate completely. People just don’t have time. Apparently. Information. Directly. Please. Thanks. Close window. Log off. Sleep.
On the off chance they may be in Steep, I drove there. At least seeing the name Edward Thomas on a hard rock would affirm in my mind that he existed. Tentatively walk into the church. Pop my head around the large wooden door. Massive cast iron hinges creaked. Relief when the church was empty. Except for the dead. I read a few of the tomb-stones. The families laid next to each other were the most intriguing. No Thomases here. Welsh name. Inhospitable place for a person with an accent. In fact, no one who had died with Edward was buried here. They had not come home. Edward had not become a part of the English soil he crumbled between his fingers.

His grave is near Arras, near the battlefield, near Wilfred Owen. At Agny military cemetery, row C, grave 43. It hovers on the very edge of living memory now. The Great War. On the precipice. What did you do in the war Mr? Got a medal in the Somme. Shrapnel. I never ever asked this question. A lost generation. The ones that lost their lives, the injured, all. The dead, the maimed, the displaced, the grieving. Theirs not to ask but to do. Theirs but to do and die. For King and Country. Hatred for the bloody mess of war. Not for the enemy. They probably felt the same. Buy a flag. And fight. For victory come what May. Quite suddenly it was over. An enemy now visible, made up of men too, who had also simply wanted to go home. Cancel history, forget hatred. A silence occurred. A silence the like of which the world had not seen since the early ages. As Edward knew would happen, the birds began to sing a moment later. Breaking the silence. Nobody wins in war. Mankind faced its greatest crisis and came out of it still capable of smiling. They had come through with flying colours. Destruction on an unparalleled scale. A never before seen loss. Future generations still haunted by it. The war to end all wars. We will remember them. Never again could it happen... The dead and the survivors, on both sides from 1914-1918, were lumped together. A soldier of the Great War. Reluctant warriors. Individuality forgotten. Just a hero. A hero with simply a rank. Second Lieutenant. Names on a wall. A village monument. Their lives reduced to their tragic deaths. The way we have always memorialised war since... One thing poetry of the period does is to bring us back fleetingly, the horrors of war. It serves as a reminder. As starkly as mass graves. There are no mass graves in England. It is therefore left to poetry to remind. To rob war of its last shred of glory. A wreath of poppies sitting sadly at the base of a memorial on a bland street dismisses history. Allows it to be walked past without a second glance or thought. In the
graveyard of Steep Church, with a lack of bodies I, for the first time, saw poetry for what it can be. Epic.

Jolted out of my malaise. Wandering beyond the church gates. I remember sitting in my car and wondering what to do next. After an epiphany in a church. There were less thoughts of driving away immediately. Poetry, memory, and haunting did need to be explored further. And there was a mingling of the three in that grave yard. But my options were limited with no hitch to hike with. No guide-poet. And no tow bar through the trees to grab hold of either. I had no way to connect. It was though a place of most hospitable hills. Lovely, lovely rolling hills. Without the immense scale of other regions. Without the wilderness, essentially - nasty word. Getting irrecoverably lost was not a worry. And not getting lost at all was a worry. Wandering alone had to be done. Losing myself - or at least feeling alone - had to be done. Only then would I feel any connection with this place. Any connection with Georgian poetry. Not ready in any way. Ill informed to boot. My first attempt at being a novice poet was about to take place. If the requirement of one to become a poet is merely a walk in the countryside without others. The soothing tones of Manchester blurted out of my car as I turned the key. Faux soprano Morrissey pleading me not to plagiarise Keats and Yeats. Not a problem, as at that point I could not recall a line from either. There was only one book of poetry at hand. A green book of collected poems, which sat on the seat beside me. One poem burned through the pages to the cover and beyond. The Manor Farm. This is where I would venture. Into the past. Along the same route Edward took. To that old farm house, and church, and yew. Unchanged for ages since.

I did not know how to get there and had no map. There was a video camera in my bag though to document the walk, if I had the luck to get lost. I wanted to start from the memorial stone and reach the farm along the maze of ancient sunken lanes. All of which looked the same in this flattened landscape. It is a walk Edward would have done regularly. And today links two important sites of pilgrimage for the Fellowship. Now and then Morrissey stole in to my thoughts. Concentrating so hard on a plan of action meant my ears had neglected to transfer sounds to my brain. Winding through the coombe at pace snapped me back in to the present. This charming man, in Little Switzerland. I was used to hearing the song in a grimy, sticky, dark
hole, that smelt simply of red bull and sweat since the smoking ban. A place and smell nobody with a racking head ache and bouts of nausea should be reminded of. Never drink cheap red wine. But I haven’t got a stitch to wear... Progressing through the turns and up the hill was despite this, a relatively nice experience. I could see the deep coombe from another angle. And therefore look across to the other side, through the trees, to the secret path, suspended up high. It was not visible though. Maybe it just did not exist, ever. Only in the imagination perhaps. Gruesome that someone so handsome should care... Twisting the knob to quieten the raucous Rusholme ruffians was important, I remember, as I turned right. This was not the sort of street, lane, in which a racket could be made. Affluent second home country. A cottage in the Quantocks felt like a compromise in comparison. Territory the likes of which people venture into for a day or two here and there. There is a furniture makers on the right preceding the houses, which begin to grow in scale the further you travel. They sit on the edge of a steep scarp. A Hanger. Stoner Hill and subsequently the Shoulder of Mutton. It is the first ridge you reach from the coast. Running parallel to the channel, east-west. Allowing you to gaze almost as far as the sea. I drove slowly to the end, until the tarmac gave way.

I parked. Booted. Bagged. Walked south. Towards the edge. With video camera in hand. Pressed record. Held it at roughly eye level. And randomly began talking like David Attenborough. Documenting the experience of my first solo expedition. Note this did not help my attempt to become a poet in the slightest, as it excessively mediated any connection to be had (any ‘poetry’ orated was either bad, weird for the sake of being weird, or postmodern groundbreaking genre-defying genius: PLEASE DELETE AS APPROPRIATE). The land-writing, site-writing, or perhaps more aptly for Literary Hitchhiking, cite-writing, had been left, partly down to the hangover, until I returned home. And unlike my first walk I had less to go on. There was no transcript from which to begin without a hitch. Therefore, I decided that walking without technology, was a step too far. The camera was my comfort blanket. Since cast off in favour of leaving everything to memory. I knew this would more than likely, once written up, result in me vowing never to go back. And would act as a deterrent for others.
I feel awful... The ground is hard... This is my first experience of walking in these hills on my own. I am going to walk to the memorial stone first, which is through these trees. I can see it about 30 metres ahead. It is very steep. Difficult to get to. The roots from trees are sticking through the soil. Have to be careful not to trip up. Look at that view. 60 miles of downs. There is the a3 running across the hills. I feel silly talking because there are some people sat on the bench. It is not as misty today. Some of the leaves have dropped to the ground. Lovely colours. Old oak tree there. Very English. Amongst lots of fir trees. This is the memorial stone. It looks so set here in this landscape. Like it was dropped from space. It is a nice inscription. Someone has left some flowers. I wonder what they are for. Birthday or death. I like this place. It feels like Edward is here. Etcetera, etcetera… My stupid voice soon grates. I carried on talking, walking, and filming in this manner for a little while longer. Though by the time I was in the lanes, I talked less. If I did talk from then on it was to say that I could hear something strange, or that this lane felt a bit eerie. Watching the first section of film back, I noticed that the long periods of my heavy breathing, plodding feet, moving shadow, and waggling camera work were the most interesting. Rather than the forced documentation of a particular point in space, where I added touchy-feely emotion here and there. I touched the memorial stone, and smelt the flowers left. Before turning around to look out over the downs. This was sufficient poetry, my words then and now are unnecessary. A stripped to the bone, silent film, in memory of Edward is far more poignant.

Sadly though, I am currently sat in my front room hoping none of my house mates come home unexpectedly. The recording of the second section of the walk, which culminates in reaching the
farm, is ready to play. And I have no idea what I will write subsequently. It will be a description of what I see. And, a description of the walk itself that I have been reminded of. Separating the two out is impossible. The real and the representational simply don’t work like that. They are one and the same. This is the fabric of life. The meaning or unmeaning. Sense or nonsense. Play. The DVD is whirring into action. I can’t help but feel that what I am about to do is sacrilege, as the day was an important milestone along the way. Memories of seeing the yew tree and church, and farm house are flooding back. Along with the feeling of being completely overwhelmed by their beauty. It was a magical mystical moment. I felt like I was in the poem. Alone with the words. And the dead. Being transported back to that day two years ago watching the film is nice. But I will no doubt sort of, unwittingly, just end up describing a filmic representation of the pilgrimage to the farm though. A disembodied account. This is in a sense the problem with representation itself. Lenses, gazes, imaginaries etc. Watching the opening scene is a self-imposed distancing. Forcing myself to forget events, skewed over recent months, in favour of what I am about to see. Diluting the stream of memory, which has flowed forth so far. Poisoning and polluting my mind’s eye forever. The lanes appear and the camera begins to shake and I move forward. I remember now that for the majority of the walk, I forgot the camera was attached to me. I knew how to use it automatically. Maybe I did see the relevant symbol initially. But it was, ready-to-hand, as Heidegger would say. Recording away. This is visible from the footage. It was a simple appendage for a few hours, an assemblage of body and thing. I was not a subject and it an object. The pre-individual, pre-cognitive, joy of using a tool occurred. Flows of movement happened, non-culturally specific, un-thought out in advance. It was a friend. As such it did not feel like an object which would eventually ruin my memory of the day. The best thing to do would be to leave it unwatched. But where is the fun, or indeed danger, in that. And subjectivity arises. In the watching. The hand strap is now dangling on screen before me. Present-to-hand, as I swat it to one side again and again.

I am at the entrance to the green lane. The book of poems is open on the correct poem. I wait for a while before walking down the lane, to finish reading the poem. I read. Some day, I think, there will be people enough In Froxfield to pick all the blackberries Out of the hedges of Green
Lane, the straight Broad lane where now September hides herself In bracken and blackberry, harebell and dwarf gorse. Today, where yesterday a hundred sheep Were nibbling, halcyon bells shake to the sway Of waters that no vessel ever sailed... It is a kind of spring: the chaffinch tries His song. For heat it is like summer too. This might be winter's quiet. While the glint Of hollies dark in the swollen hedges lasts - One mile - and those bells ring, little I know Or heed if time be still the same, until The lane ends and once more all is the same. My finger follows these words to the end. I close the book and look up from the poem and down the lane. I move forward, shaking the camera as little as possible. I notice bluebells or foxgloves on my left and walk over to them. A splash of colour in the otherwise green sea. Dirty brown water has gathered in two channels running as far as I can see. Separated by a grass verge. Tractor tracks enter the water and disappear. Nettles as tall as people emerge from the green as I become enveloped. Now all I can see other than green foliage are telegraph wires soaring overhead, cutting across me now and then. The water channels end, and there is once more a small splash of blue. Large leaves overhang the lane, narrowing it. A dead end up ahead. Nature has closed the lane. I look through the dense winding trees, and see a gap and a patch of sunlight. I spin round to relieve my tunnel vision, a scene of rolling hills and hedgerows can be seen momentarily. Before the lens is blinded by the intense light and all I see is white. I look back down to the poem. A ladybird has landed on the page. It is noticeably red. Beyond the book, left of screen, signs of leisure pursuits, visible on the ground. Horse shit and their shoe prints, followed by the marks of a bicycle in the cloggy clay. Dismount here for the deep water I can now see reflecting away. Crossing it is hard work. It looks impassable. I follow the footprints left by others and back into the wall of lush bush. The camera faces down into the water, which reflects my staggered gait stepping over and under prickly holly. Only there beside the water. For the pleasure of my discomfort. Stabbing at my hands as I try to hold it at bay. A white butterfly. Lands on a small island of earth. I stop there. I rest for a moment and look back the way I came. A tunnel of pixelated green. Nothing else. I struggle to pick out a single species from the spotty mess. Realising that, a quick turn back, blurs all to be seen. Merging all the bushes and trees, into a simple splat of green, subsequently dragged across a screen. Before I stop the swirl and settle upon a horse and its rider coming closer and closer. Clipping and
clopping, and swishing its tail back and forth. I do not move. Another horse and rider follows
yards behind doing the same, clipping and clopping, and swishing its tail back and forth. Both
splash through the water and around me on my island without a second glance. Although, I am
wished good luck by the riders, as they bob by. Pitifully viewing me from up high. The horses
huff as they leave, of course, down the lane. My breathing is less audible now. I must be fully
rested. I carry on. Only the sound of my feet splashing stains the silence that has occurred once
more. Everything is back to normal visually. Green, green, green. Circles of water extend from
my shoe as I tap away at the surface. And the telegraph wires soar over head, through the clear
blue sky. I trudge farther and farther down the lane. All I see is the same, until I reach a small
clearing. Here the mud and clay melts, in a molten white light, seeping towards the lens and
back in slithery streams. This is dammed when a tall tree is reached. Darkness descends, and a
rabbit hops beyond a barbed wire fence. Ivy and Holly tangle themselves around the usual
green. Strangling spindly trees, like posts perfectly spaced. A large solitary white flower sits in
sadness amongst the naked branches. A climbing rose, I think, with thorns of its own. It appears
as if the seasons were working their way down the lane, as I walk out of it through the grave of
summer. The season I entered the lane in the height of. I walk on and pursue winter further.
Before I stop and reflect on the tarmac of a more typical road. After a few moments the camera
is switched off.

The next scene begins with me travelling quickly towards a crossroads. Storm clouds are
gathering and a blackbird arcs right over me, landing nearby. Once at the junction I walk
directly across the middle of it. There is nothing in any direction. It appears as if I am in the
middle of nowhere. So I continue to walk quickly. The camera pointing dead ahead, always.
Until I recognise something and divert my gaze to the right. An empty square of black cast iron
on the top of a white post. It is the pub with no name, up in the wind. I now slow my gait. And
walk over to the new or freshly sanded five bar wooden gate, demarcating drive and road,
clientele and peasant. The pub car park is full and voices can be heard. I do not stay long, no
doubt wary of filming a human. I’m left detached from others by my appendage. Back on the
road again descending little by little, I film my shadow for a while. Studying it almost. I
straighten myself and begin to march. I do not know why. Though it certainly adds to the film as a spectacle after a continued stretch of tarmac. An enchanting spectre in an unpopulated landscape. When the camera is pointed ahead once again, I seem to have reached the lowest point of a sunken lane. It is dark with the odd beam of sunlight shedding between leaves on to a glittering damp ground. Here the lane splits in two. The confluence of a dry river bed, banks taller than myself, channelling a small amount of water still. I take the identical tributary, to the right, past a triangle of earth, unsunken unlike the rest. Blue in the distance. Something to aim for. All very uninteresting and banal. But at least I had sort of surrendered myself to being lost, to mystery and oddity. And attempted in a sense to be fully present in a landscape I had previously floated over, been guided through, on a whistle stop tour of poetic sites. A more sustained attempt at getting lost needed to occur though. With no references relied on from past hitchhikes. After taking the slight right the image of the screen remained unchanged. I did not know when the manor farm would appear, or if it would. I do now. I am waiting expectantly for it to appear on the screen. Instead the lane sunk into the landscape bends randomly to the right. And the tree canopy is removed. I do not remember the house that the camera reveals. I see a little picket fence first. Followed by a crisp Georgian facade. A real version of the tent I had stumbled out of a few hours earlier. The lawn is well maintained. Perfect lines where it has been mowed. Surrounded by neat borders. No scorch marks or empties here. But a brown wheelie bin does spoil the otherwise sublime. The canopy returns beyond the bin and spots of light begin to affect the lens. The lane is too dark or too light for it. Movement causes strobing to occur. And it becomes unwatchable. I have to turn away from the telly. I am trying to remember roughly how long I walked this lane for. Not long as it turns out. The screen is awash with warming sunlight soon after. I catch it out of the corner of my eye and begin watching myself again. I know now I am now not far from the farm. There are a number of greenhouses on my left and the picture is now bathed in the glow of rolling hills and clear skies. In the background something red stands out against the usual green. It reveals itself as a phone box. The sort of which I only ever now see in London. Opening the door and picking up the receiver had to be done. I remember the door being heavy. It opens slowly on the film and slams shut behind me. Looking out through the thin plate glass is an interesting shot. The scene now framed twice in
this glass box trellised in cast red metal latticework. An old white sign is directly outside, blurred, making the places hard to make out. Beyond the point with what I think says Petersfield 5 miles, scribed in black, is the church dwarfed by that great yew. A huge dark silhouette against a pale blue sky. I open the heavy door slowly and leave the hot box and immediately turn to my left to look up at the manor farm. I back up to fit the whole of the house in shot. Revealing window after window in the process and two tall brick chimney stacks. Reminiscent of more industrial buildings. There is nothing overtly ostentatious about the architecture. It is a genuine rakety packetty, unrendered, imposing brick structure. Authentically English, like the phone-box. Left visibly ragged at the edges. Tiles missing full of moss, gaps in a muddled brick work, odd windows of different shapes and sizes. The white Georgian facade glossing over all those perfect imperfections is thankfully missing. It does not appear to be a working farm anymore though. Just a large empty detached family home. There is no cattle grid here or any arable crop nearby. Its power derives from an image of past endeavor still evident. Traced in the little things. The nooks and crannies. The sense of the soil, the labour. Something is going to happen but I don’t know what it will be. The mangled plough dug into the ground, unused for ages, or the ancient five-bar gate falling off the hinges, without need now to keep in a cow, could creak into action at any moment. I look down at the book of poems and read. The rock-like mud unfroze a little and rills Ran and sparkled down each side of the road Under the catkins wagging in the hedge. But earth would have her sleep out, spite of the sun; Nor did I value that thin gilding beam More than a pretty February thing Till I came down to the Manor Farm, And church and yew-tree opposite, in age Its equals and in size. Small church, great yew, And farmhouse slept in a Sunday silentness. My finger stops at this point and I close the book. I wander slowly over to the church and yew tree. The original pagan meeting point of the yew inundates the newer Christian one and indeed the whole shot. Nothing did happen. Nothing will happen. Nothing happens as I read the sign for the church. I already know it is a church. Inevitably the sign is not of any great interest. Written in gold on a blue background are the words, Priors Dean Church. The rest is unreadable. It is in bad condition. A symbol of a dwindling congregation. Paint chipping away from the ply. Overgrown by sticky weed and nettles. The towering yew, forcing it to lean forward, as it swells still, after half a millennia.
Beside the sign, still beneath the great ancient yew, is a rotting gate. It is open. A path leads from the small gate and winds round the gnarly great yew to the door of the church. I walk it. Even on screen it appears an enchanting few steps. Like a fairy tale of some description. The entrance into another time not so long ago. The time of Edward. I end where I began this pilgrimage. On hallowed ground. In a graveyard. With the spectre of Edward hanging in the air. His words, a thick fog, hanging heavy on this site. Yet otherwise alone in this landscape, as I had wished. These ancient graves, pitted and cracked, are unvisited. Uncared for anymore by the living. All given over to moss and lichen. Weathered and worn to leave these sorrowful blank graves. Nondescript lumps of grey stone, washed clean only by the wind and rain. A stone the shape of a cross stands out. There are no flowers. No individuals. Just the dead. Lumped together in a yard. Round the back of the church on its own, the tomb of the unknown soldier too, laid to rest beneath the immortal yew. I read the last lines of the poem. The Winter’s cheek flushed as if he had drained Spring, Summer, and Autumn at a draught And smiled quietly. But ’twas not Winter - Rather a season of bliss unchangeable Awakened from farm and church where it had lain Safe under tile and thatch for ages since This England, Old already, was called Merry. I close the book. I close the gate. Silence and darkness.
It was not long before I snapped out of my poetic state. I was too swivety and occupied to take anything else in. The New Forest and a snifter before bed was back in my head. The site of church yew and farm had taken its toll. Along with the long walk and the abstraction from the previous loop completed days prior with Colin and Larry. I yearned for my car and a different form of motion. Or a view of the organic shapes of clouds rolling across the vast concrete cooling towers at Didcot Power Station. It meant I walked the most direct route back. Passing less celebrated farms with a minimum of fuss. Corrugated iron, breeze blocks, barbed wire, cattle. Proper working farms. Along wide flat metalled roads. Out of the maze of sunken lanes, inscribed into the landscape over centuries. Leaving me on the surface. Scratching away at very little. Not lost in the slightest. Able to see for miles in all directions. And place myself within the landscape. Flat fields, hedgerows, the odd cluster of houses. Before the end and the ridge of mutton. A view of the South Downs was rarely improved by any car. It was at that moment. As it represented my route back to normality. Only once inside the car could I begin to think through the day. The car cajoled drifting off, back to the sunken lanes. Sunken lanes which had been hospitable. More so than during the loop with Larry and Colin. Perhaps the poetry had got

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in the way too much last time. Affecting the connection with this landscape. Also, was that the best way to experience the poetry itself? Too connective between site and writing, too selective as to what is to be viewed, too restrictive in terms of what can be thought. I drove on. Piecing together where I went wrong this morning. It was something to do with the m27. Not the Dumbbell Nebula in the constellation Vulpecula. At a distance of 1360 light years. Rather the still unfinished motorway near Southampton. 25 miles in length. Again it confused. Less so this time. To not end up in the city centre seemed impossible. The m271 came to the rescue. Swooping me away from the sea at the last moment and away to the forest. The newest national park. Ashurst now appeared on signs. Mini horses scrabbled away from the *mini*. And the tents appeared on the horizon. Less garish than before in the low evening sun. They were fun. Like brightly painted beach huts. None of the mess was present. Empties, scorch marks, and fag ends. Cleaned away. Remnants of my life earlier in the day. After the redemptive walk no more were they. I parked by the tent. Nobody was around bar a prophetic gathering of deck chairs. I seemed destined to be alone. I checked my phone. Colin had rang. I returned the call. He was very apologetic and angry at the absence of the rude writers. I said it didn’t matter. And it didn’t. There was a shitty warm carling laid on its side in the porch. I sipped it, fortifying my tissue once more. Sat in a deck chair and reflected on my first real experience of poetry; a re-walking of the route of a walk-poem, using it as a precursor. Creating a new version out of our contemporary landscape was now a possibility, having tracked the self through it with a video-camera. There was a definite chance, thanks to the absence of the writers, of writing a long poem, incorporating historical, literary, pop-cultural, and autobiographic dimensions. An impending poethood beckoned. Once the dust had settled from beneath my aching feet, mind. Happy with my days work, I leant back against the flimsy material. Conscious of a robustness now returned to my cheeks. Sipped, waited for C, and imagined Edward, half Welsh, half English, belonging nowhere, mildly schizophrenic, sat opposite cross legged, relaxing with a pipe. The original literary pilgrim. Still relevant.

Exeter, April 2010
The chalk-pit: a residual walk

‘The idea of accumulating everything, the idea of constituting a sort of general archive, the desire to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself out of time and protected from its erosion, the project of this organising a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will not move - well, in fact, all of this belongs to our modernity.’

(The Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault)

The girlfriend felt she was getting drunk at last. At the same time it crossed my mind that we really should be leaving the house party. It was funny: a few minutes before the argument started I had a feeling something was wrong. I looked warily round, and my gaze settled on a couple in the corner. I thought nothing of their arguing to begin with. As it grew louder the room became interested. I struggle to remember now what they were arguing about. It ended with a slap, that much I remember. The guy who squatted in the house down the Cowley Road, a friend of a friend, said and did nothing. Just shrugged and drank a pink drink. We had talked about his job as a gardener, cash in hand, for an hour or so, until we witnessed the slap. He had just cooked up in his bedroom. And was gutted when everyone dispersed soon after. Before the shooting up. I was stone cold sober. I did not want to feel like I had the weekend before on the ill-fated meeting with the writers. When all the fluids in my brain were soaked up by an ethanol dowsed sponge. The girlfriend was gin added. With a miserable inevitability she would break down at some point during the night. It was only a matter of time. I lost her soon after we had left and subsequently got very little sleep. I found her again a few moments later, on the street where Edward had lived - strangely no plaque adorned the house. But the damage had already been done. We talked of nothing else, other than my momentary absence, until what felt like morning. I hated to hear her sobbing back then. I can remember her contorted face and the noise
that came out of it as clear as day. It would not stop. She could not control it. The gin mist had taken hold. In the taxi or in her bedroom, it did not matter. She talked of nothing else, she sobbed, and I sat awake listening. Eventually, exhausted, she slumped to one side, slept, and snored. And I sat awake listening, as always, watching her with wonderment and intrigue. C is no more than an absent presence in my life now, as are those tears. A presence that I will miss terribly when it is gone altogether. I fear forgetting. The past clings on, just, and outs itself as a smell, a sound, a sight, still haunting my present. Memories are seemingly made of only this. As, I inevitably dwell in a point in time spent alone with her, nowhere else, when I think I can hear those sweet gin tears, through the endless drunken din. My memory is for the moment broken beyond repair or working perfectly. I cannot work out which.

In the morning nothing was said bar bye. I doubt she remembered any of the previous night. Now the gin cloud had been lifted. I kissed her soft pale cheek and left dead tired. Quietly closing the door of the old stone workers cottage. Before walking down the winding path and shutting the creaky iron gate. My thoughts drifted to the matter in hand once in the car. Despite extreme fatigue, driving soothed my aching body and I finally woke up properly. I had seen everything with my eyes only up until that point. Floating to the car, brushing past things, in my own little world. But from then on, my weak body began to engage. I noticed the gear-stick and steering wheel and sped up slightly. Enjoying the feeling of control I now had. The landscape scrolled across the windscreen from the centre slipping down the sides of the car. I sometimes followed it eagerly. Binding my body to the view, in a more sensational aesthetics. An original aesthetics. Colours ostensibly became more lurid and violent. Landscape appeared to be basking in a glow of eastmancolor. In which the few cars shooting towards me and away from me, began to stand out against the pastel back drop of grey, green, brown and black. I saw only stylised images shocking the senses, with odd shafts of fluorescence. It had rained buckets all week, leaving a leaden grey sky, which I remember vividly. It was to be a signal of impending doom for the hike, or so I thought at the time. Roads were rivers and England was at a stand-still. But luckily I coasted down the a34 over flooded fields, behind my bright bonnet, under the advancing waves of heavy cloud. Water lapping at the edge of the road. Reservoir after
reservoir, swimming pool after swimming pool, roofed by mountainous formations of yet more water. And separated by tree lined promenades that were originally hedgerows. I thought of *Literary Hitchhiking* in the rain. Kicking up standing water in sync, routinely reciting Edward. Colin had given me the name of the person I was meeting this week. A man called Doug. Only a name, nothing else. We were to meet at Steep Church and walk together for a few hours across sodden ground. At least there was a pair of borrowed walking boots sat on the back seat. Their technology would save me from frozen feet around the corner. Within the hour, I was winding down Petersfield Road. Surface water had collected in the hidden dips near Bramdean. In which the car squirmed around at high speeds. Waves spurring out from under the tyres. The tarmac was dry otherwise. Paler than earlier in my journey. In the trees around Langrish the dampness seemed to seep through the windscreen. It hung in the air, as warming specks of water. Seen only against the slanting sunbeams. Out of the copse, there were no longer any drops. They had been falling from leaves luckily. In the open the railway station now loomed. Before it brought back too many memories of the week before. Waiting for... I had taken a sharp left and crossed the busy a3. Before turning right in to the little village of Steep. I remember still feeling incredibly weak and in need of a sleep. But there was no waiting around, no nap, as my hitch was leaning against a wall. With trepidation I recall traipsing over to the hatless man once parked. Not before rubbing the folded label on the inside of my t-shirt, back and forth, with my finger and thumb, a few times. An uncontrollable nervous tick, I have had since childhood. It was a strange feeling to know I was about to spend a few hours alone with a stranger in a strange land.

I did not know what to expect but I did not expect Doug. A talking walker, a staunch traditionalist, a conservationist, with a soft Scottish accent, which upon hearing, automatically encouraged a little back-story to appear in my mind. Doug was a countryman who knew the Downs and the Weald like the back of his hand. Walking them routinely each weekend. Following in the footsteps of the wild shepherd herding his sheep across the chalk land. Down the same droveways, bridleways and footpaths. Ancient routes east-west. Enjoying the picturesque, with a good knowledge of the flora and the fauna. And the therapeutic wandering
still to be had on this relatively unpopulated ridge. In spite of the lack of grazing sheep. Absent from a Downs. Unfit for animals now. Unless fenced in on all sides. Only people can attempt to graze. Along the straight, impoverished, degraded, modern byway. Wasteland once, not now, with its original use lost. A romantic thought to have nowadays, to see thousands of smelly sheep dropped on to the sanitised downs, rewilding as they grazed happily away. Taking out the lines of tourists. But it pleased Doug nonetheless; a modern day Edward, unlike the majority of the Fellowship. The Scotsman could have provided the perfect antidote to the writers of the previous week. Who would have concentrated on the net of literary associations spread over the Downs and beyond. Whilst Doug would in contrast regale stories of the making of this landscape. From deep ecology to the anthropocene. Probably what Colin had in mind. Wanting to show me the two aspects of the Fellowship. The ones who joined because of the poetry and the ones who joined because of the walking in the land. And the crossbreeds. I remember fondly the first thing he said. I do not know anything about Edward really, you can probably teach me. I just bumped into a group of what looked like ramblers once, when walking the Hangers. I became a member of something called The Edward Thomas Fellowship, there and then. Those words rang true to an extent, as we walked to the chalk-pit - immortalised in verse by Edward but missed out of the introductory loop by Colin and Larry - talking of Star Wars, his youth, The ABC in Fulham, Alec Guinness, walking, The South Downs National Park, the countryside, and family. It is this variety of subjects, of which Doug spoke freely immediately, that the poetry perhaps stifles. I was allowed to walk and write as myself a little more because I thought of finding only one residual poem - the elusive Chalk-Pit: mopping up the leftover poetry. And it also helped that Doug told me about all aspects of his life. I knew of his passions within moments, as he described the first time he owned a camcorder. It was before anybody else had one. The rhythmic plodding of our feet seemed to increase his ability to recall past events. And being in a landscape he held dear helped his recognition of all walking in all landscapes. He opened up to me, a perfect stranger, remembering his first films. Recording many apparently dull events. Events that he did not know were poignant at the time. Footage of the Fellowship from days gone by. Faces of yesteryear now older or not here at all. The signing of a birthday card for Edward, more than twenty years ago. Myfanwy was present and other members of the
family now gone. Hours of film documented and catalogued for posterity. Now a part of the vast Fellowship archive. Doug became the unofficial documentary maker of the Fellowship. We therefore walked, documented, and archived for a few hours...

We were padding along the wrong route really. A way which contained none of the usual sighters. No poetic sites, houses, or memorials. Our minds wandering to a greater extent. Doug went right back to his childhood and Scotland. Border country around Edinburgh. Where hills rise and fall like they do in the Downs. Rolling smoothly and accessibly into the distance. And tangibly into his past. To the day when he first picked up a camera and filmed the Edinburgh Tattoo. The coils of film are still at home. Mnemonic reels now of the Scotland Doug left at 19 for London and a job as a civil servant. Not a particularly enjoyable one as it turned out. Poorly paid in comparison to others. Tediumous hours spent on the same old tasks. And the commute was a pain. It was whilst walking to the tube station for work one day that Doug stumbled upon a sign. It hung outside the ABC cinema in Fulham and said, male attendant wanted. Being strapped for cash at the time the job seemed like a good option. Tentatively Doug walked into the cinema expecting a rejection because he could only work evenings and weekends. As it turned out though, the manager was looking for someone to work exactly those shifts. The busiest times. For £9 a week. £2 more a week than his normal wage at the time. Doug would leave work on the Strand every evening and get the tube to Fulham Broadway. He would then don his ABC uniform and attend until closing. The manager asked a lot in the end. Many things became a part of the duties of an attendant. Often tiredness would result in falling asleep still standing during the final showing. Sundays were the worst when they would show a horror film. This attracted all the local youths and yobbos. It was the worst part of the job, as the attendant was supposed to control them. I was a blob, or something, would come on at 4pm and they would stay well into the evening. Nobody had anything to do on a Sunday. No pubs were open and people had stopped going to church. The cinema was the only option. They would talk and throw things. After a few weeks though it seemed normal and was less of an issue. The youths were left alone to do as they please. And in return Doug was left alone and not beaten up. At 7pm, Laurence of Arabia or Bridge on the River Kwai, or something similar would come on and
most of them would shuffle out. Some people would return the next night and the next night. Mesmerised by the grand old cinema. Or perhaps just to get out of the cold with nowhere else to go. It was the films, such as Laurence of Arabia and Bridge on the River Kwai, showed in the late evenings, which fascinated a young Doug the most. The exotic scenery, so far removed from inner city London worked as a form of escapism. And as they were endlessly repeated he would constantly see new things in them, missed before. It was fitting then that in his middle age he would move to the same village as Alec Guinness. An actor he had always admired. We took a slight detour down to Steep Marsh. Where the actor moved in the 50s and had a house built. At the time he was not a particularly wealthy man. Most of his money came from Star Wars, playing Obi-Wan Kenobi in 1977. Doug recalled seeing his name in the 1991 census, describing it as a nice feeling. And used to see Alec in a pub we frequented on the way to the chalk-pit. It was a scruffier pub in his day, unchanged since the days of Edward. Who would himself have drank in there on occasion. The Harrow Inn. A beautiful 17th Century pub set in the middle of the Hangars. A white veranda, wound around by vines, props up the frontage. And inside there is a smoking room and a variety of ales in barrels. I sat outside the front with Doug on a traditional bench and had a swift half. The lane was quiet. So much so that it felt like a tarmac garden. There were no toilets inside the small saloon bar. They were on the opposite side of the lane. This was not a problem. If anything there was something very endearing about the old outdoor bogs. Enclosing the dozen benches where we sat amongst crumbling old brick structures. Greengage, apple, mulberry, and fir trees enclosed us further. And spotted amongst the trees were delphiniums, poppies, everlasting-sweet peas, roses and dahlias. While in a shady corner campanula, phlox, and allium grew. It felt like a chocolate box country cottage garden. The sort you see on a greetings card. Alec liked to sit out in front with a beer we were told by the attentive landlord. He continued. Implying Alec was the kind of man who did not really like to be bothered. Yes, it was the solitude of Steep Marsh that meant he never moved away, so said Doug in reply. I’ve always admired Alec Guinness in a sense, was his next utterance. The landlord left. Doug continued. And whilst in the house he built there he wrote a few books. Diaries that were published in the 80s and 90s reminiscing about his film career working with Laurence Olivier, David Lehman, and Peter O’Toole, and back further to his time in the navy.
There are points in the diaries were he would write of driving into Petersfield in the rain or wandering over the Hangers in the sun. He enjoyed walking around Steep and was witnessed doing so, but he never walked with the *Fellowship*. One would see whilst walking, Alec occasionally sat in the garden of his unpretentious house. The last time Doug saw Alec, he was pottering around weeding. He was all stooped over and had a head of white hair. Not long after Doug saw him in his garden, Alec died. We left the pub immediately after this statement and walked down the lane to the house were Alec lived. Doug would see his wife walking the dog along this way often. Until she passed away too. Only a few months after the death of her husband.

Doug could not remember exactly how to get to the chalk-pit. We were about half way there. It was somewhere on the other side of Wheatham Hill, which was itself beyond a gathering of bedraggled trees. Bent-double by the wind. They had been planted in two straight lines and lead us up the hill. Doug knew this much. But had become confused about its location in the landscape. Only a blank path to the site existed in his memory. Alec Guinness had led us astray. The only option was to return to Steep and reacquaint ourselves with the Hangers. From the church Doug would know the way. There was no need to go as far as the church though as it happened. Doug remembered the route once the shoulder was again visible in the distance. We nipped across a couple of recently harvested soggy wheat or barley fields. Where a lack of colour was evident amongst the short sharp stems. That crunched and squeaked loudly when crushed beneath my soles. No rough poppy, corn marigold, or corn chamomile. As had been noted by Edward in these parts mingling amongst the arable crop. Only the familiar pale green the field had been sown with. The pretty wild flowers had been killed off, weeded out, fertilised, without local protest. Behind the now empty field stood the silhouette of the shoulder shaped scarp on the skyline. Covered in trees. Magnificent beeches. In the late 1950s, Doug told me of a proposal to cut down the beeches that populated the hanger. As a result of this threat to the picturesque, the Petersfield Society bought the trees, and the County Council bought the land from Stoner to Wheatham. Many of the most beautiful beeches were saved. Especially those on the skyline. Other trees were discarded and new ones planted. Ensuring the status of the
Shoulder of Mutton, as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The crunching mass of pollen directly beneath it gave on to the Hangers Way, which ends at a park in Petersfield. And begins at Alton Railway Station, 21 miles north. It is less walked than the 100 mile South Downs Way, which follows the droveways along the chalk escarpment running across the country. But is beautiful nonetheless. Doug walked over to the only cascading waterfall around, more impressive than before, and up in to some standard marshland. Following the arrows on little plastic discs through Ashford Chase. And led me further up in to dense beech hangers. The richest woodland on English chalk. The Ashford Hangers. The steeply wooded slopes previously seen from the field below. If we had continued along the way we would have reached Selbourne. Along chalk paths shone new everyday by flowing water from the summit. The place once home to naturalist observer-wanderer and founding father of the ecology movement, Gilbert White. Where he poetically described his day-to-day experiences of nature. And sent letters of his observations to two zoologists of the time. The letters were published in 1789 as *The Natural History and Antiques of Selbourne*. In which due to the incessant walking around his house he described previously undiscovered creatures. It reads as an inspired and detailed study of his local landscape. An example of the Enlightenment ideal. A deceptively simple account of wildlife through the seasons, which changed how we look at the natural world. Doug veered sharply to the right and off the way. Down one of the many paths that criss-cross the Hangers. Trampled daily by Edward. Another observer-wanderer of the Downs. Walking across the landscape in a way which is lost to a large extent today. Look in to the past, rediscover it, and along the way, our respect for the land. We went looking for Edward again.

A narrow chalk path, aslant. The one Doug had veered on to. Turned out to be an easy way up to the memorial stone. Ascending, not directly over the crest, like in the past. Via the sparkling shards of willow pattern plate. But up a shallow slope hung above a patch of pine on the side of the hanger. Amongst the dense beech copse. A short cut, always facing out to sea, the railway, the South Downs Way, the a3. Doug regained his intimate geography of this place. Climbing at pace a natural staircase of chalk, cut into, jutting from, the scarp face. A slippage of faults in that soft, white, porous, sedimentary rock. Erosion of the cliffs over Petersfield. Selfsame strata,
dive down to the sea at Dover. I was though wandering the south rather than the north downland. They were separated by the Weald. Never did we go over the other side towards the north band of calcium carbonate, stretching from Farnham to the meeting of the English Channel and the North Sea. Or even the flattened, eventually hollowed, middle. Beyond the green lane and the manor farm. The soft Weald. A caldera of sorts now, it was once the centre of a chalk land arching over from Beachy Head to Dover. Removed of its chalk cover over 60 million years. Dug away through the toil of water and wind to make a huge dry valley. Leaving the north facing escarpment of the South Downs along the southern edge of the Weald, with the south facing escarpment of the North Downs as its counterpart left on the other edge. Landing at the top of the chalk stair case allowed us to see far across the smooth plateau of clays and sands. 60 miles of downs in an instant, a sweep of the head from right to left. Reading the landscape before ourselves like a book. Witnessing from our chalky vantage point, the deep time, the rock formations and rivers, we had previously discussed. Now with the monumental additions of the road, the railway, the chain of pylons, the town, the country estate, the farm, the arable field, the way, the hedgerow, and Neolithic remains, jostling for our attention amongst the former sheep rearing soil; intertwinings between and across vibrant spatialities, gatherings of emergent processes, cultural fluctuations, and flows of action, going on incessantly. Loves, laughs, fears, exploitations. No gaps in a jampacked scene, a material ether, from my body through Doug, and on to the horizon. A mêlée of stuff, people, bumping, swimming, grinding, glistening, floating, breaking and withdrawing in an ambiotic fluid of yet more stuff. Just as if gazing from the roof of an old skyscraper down to the archetypal busy avenue beneath. And beyond the extent of our vision on the periphery of this southern most chalk seam, an uninterrupted ribbon of seaside towns. Culminating in the chalk stacks at the haunting Beachy Head. Eye now racing from the rising tide to a suicide on the River Ouse. The tormented Woolf hearing voices. Fills pockets full of stones and drowns herself. A statue marks the spot of death. Another pilgrimage site for a brisk mourning walk. Ended by throwing yourself into the river in a macabre homage, to a prominent member of the Bloomsbury set. And not to forget, Algernon Charles Swinburne, On the South Coast, past those smooth-swelling unending downs, walking the line. Ignoring those grey seaside towns, where everyday is no doubt like Sunday. According to Doug, life was hard
for many in the downland, just as it was in urban areas. Cottages were often no more than cold damp hovels. Disease was rife. Work was hard. It was a pitiable existence for all but the wealthy land owner. Over time, these hills were largely deserted in favour of the city suburbs. Come, come, nuclear bomb... Blat my body, burn away at the flesh.
We had forgotten about the danger that can be inflicted by our gazing. The problem of being obsessed with documenting, like a regular peeping tom. Inadvertently asserting your dominance over everything you see. Taming the wilderness, experiencing the sublime, like Byron and Turner. I remember struggling for a while, to make sense of what it was we had seen. Too much information had penetrated our eyeballs and fizzed in our minds. Too much time. Layers and layers of the stuff. I was worried we had begun to brashly overlook landscape, privileging too much the odd observation I had and the borrowed knowledge of Doug. The Downs have been extensively overwritten in great detail, for centuries previous. Leaving bookmarks, emerging from everywhere, some about human perception, some about intermingling non-humans. I made a mental note and addressed it to my collection of selves. Remember, remember the plurality of place. Many albions, many Downs, many wordsmiths. Must rely on small stories and perception where possible. Dazed and confused we fell back on to what we knew. The hill on which, for the entire journey, we had been standing. The Shoulder of Mutton. A vertiginous escarpment, dedicated to Edward, as of the 1930s. When stone masons went through 36 chisels, mounting the plaque on the hard sarsen rock face. Marking as they chipped away, the end of, at least on the surface, on the map, the aristocratic way. This was now the hill of Edward and the people who mourned his loss. No longer an extensive garden for the lord of the manor. Lord Horder. Doug descended further towards the solid wooden memorial bench. Whereupon he ate a little triangle sandwich filled with some sort of paste. Continuing to look out as many have before him, the bench dead, Edward, and all, over the sand and clay flats. A form of motion was necessary. I ran back up the steep chalk slope to recombobulate. But only managed to keep up the pace first set for a few strides. Turning the run into a jog and eventually a swift walk with a strange gait. I was taking on three rungs of a ladder in one go up the visible root system, that held the hill in place. Lead foot scraping over the slippery bark on occasion forcing my head down and forward in a bowing motion. Before recovering balance by bringing the other foot quickly upwards to inhabit a similar level. Crows scattered, hearing the commotion. A fence and a sign facing inland halted my movements. I circled the fence and could now see the
information imposed. Ashford Hangers tattooed in large bold lettering on to a brown rectangle. Beyond which out of the corner of my eye flashed the horizon. It drew me out from behind the plywood board. And I stared into a distance, framed by the beech and pine previously scrabbled through. Floating forward slightly without thought over little stones with eyes always dead ahead. Again caught up in the enchantment of the picturesque. Entranced, I stopped to take a photograph I remember. Middle distance returned soon after which, Edward and Doug, stone and bench, sat looking over this tract together. It is not for me to make sense of this messy landscape. I let the markers of time wash over me once more and bothered not of putting everything in its right place. Discombobulated myself and again embraced fractured disconnected impressions of the Downs, met along the way. Doug had finished his pack lunch and was motoring up to the stone against which I was lent. Concentrating on his footing as he walked, bent over compensating for the incline. A training method, undertaken now and then, in preparation for arduous walks with Wainwright and Wordsworth, up to tarns. Gasping but somehow still striding he read the inscription half covered by my body. And then I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey. I love that. It is what I always think. The words cajoled me into action like the words of a sports teacher on a cold winter’s day. I left Edward behind and followed Doug. Hot on his heels we made good progress. And were soon in thick woodland.

For what I thought was a suitable amount of time. We talked of the psychological need in many to traverse these wooded hills. And thought of myriad previous excursions from home, to the therapeutic countryside, and back again. Sauntering down a narrow, dark, damp, poker straight path, often taken by Edward. Before I felt comfortable enough to ask a question about the proposed South Downs National Park. A subject which has divided the Fellowship. I did not know what reaction I would get from someone who regularly walks these hills. But I needed to garner local opinion, capture their stories. Doug began. People are very protective around here. My heart sank. I had stoked the fire and could not remove the red hot poker from my grasp. He continued but in a lower volume. They don’t want it to become a national park. They say once this place opens up it won’t be ours any more. The national campaign to get Steep within the
boundaries of the park was not welcomed. Neither was getting the inquiry reopened. The quality of land round here did not merit national park status according to an inspector. Locals were happy about that. The Friends of Steep and Hampshire County Council coppice the area around the memorial stone adequately. I like to see hills and they are just right for me. Not like the Lake District. The days of me walking around there are numbered. Obviously, this can’t compare in a way. Kent is a garden. The whole of England is just one big garden. When you think about it. The Petersfield Society are campaigning to get Steep included in the South Downs National Park. They got famous people from London involved. And made changes to include Petersfield but he’s not going to decide until January. The funny thing is, is most of the people in Steep say they don’t want a national park. Changing things is not really necessary. We’ll go up this way and you can see the chalk pit. They are worried if they open it up you will get groups of walkers. They are worried that if they don’t get it, it won’t be an area of outstanding natural beauty and won’t be protected. The area will change if they do get national park status.

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Since my walk with Doug the boundary line has been redrawn, placing the Ashford Hangers at the centre of a new national park. The line extends far further north and west than first imagined. Encompassing the whole of the South Downs. Beginning at Winchester and the base of the a34, stretching as far as the sea and the Beachy Head stacks. In April 2011 all planning on the inside of the redrawn line will be the responsibility of the South Downs National Park Authority. The new park will be left to natures winding hands to a greater extent, with the council ousted from power, forced to coppice less. A process of passive rewilding will begin, and a state of wilderness encouraged. Preventing large scale farming projects, far removed from the plough. Organic only now, forgetting the livelihoods of hard working farmers, feeding the masses. Place changed for the privileged few, if what Doug said on that soulless straight path,
comes true. All due to the new status bestowed upon it. Aesthetic alterations, changes to planning regulations, the influx of yet more rich London folk, and the force feeding of information to school kids on trips, are a given it seems. Along with the worrying clamour, to find some form of national identity in the rolling hills of the south. And to reassert them in the public collective consciousness. Redefining a row of quaint places, cricket and warm beer, as part of a typically English landscape. A landscape of the good old days, clung to, as a point of serene stillness. An unspoilt pre-Christian, non-industrial, unenclosed Eden. A rural idyll safe from the demands of everyday life, distinct from the city, part of an eternal, unchanging, secure England. A period of back romanticising is already underway. Reconfiguring a supposedly twee landscape into a vehicle for a contemporary revolution in thought. Arguing there is still something enduringly important about these hills. Something more than a mere tea towel culture, according to art historian Sir Roy Strong. As more than any other hills they represent English landscape, even England itself. They are cast as the classic image of rolling countryside, forever gone back to, deeply ingrained in the national psyche. This is England. This is what our national identity is informed by. If so, I am not sure I belong here, in England.

An advertisement for the South Downs National Park would roughly read: Walk the smooth hills as a middle class city-dweller and you are transmogrified into a peasant working the land. The new national park is easily accessible from Oxfordshire, Wiltshire, and the Home Counties, and only a short drive in the Range Rover from the gateway to the countryside: the south-west suburbs of the capital, the start of the a3. In no time, at such a proximity, you will be amongst rows of ramblers sporting waxed or quilted Barber coats and tweed flat caps. All attempting a reconnect, flashing privileged gazes. Getting down to the root of what it means to be English. Tapping into a national identity largely scraped away. Encouraged by a newly imposed imaginary. Leaving picturesque England safe under tile and thatch. Images enveloping actuality, whilst walkers hold the landscape in their hands like Gilpin. With no foreigners or working class there to spoil the photograph. They will be wandering the city or jogging at the gym. Mundane walking practices. Only the well educated, are able to get back to nature fully and feel at one with their own bit of merry England. Or second home as it is also known. Others just get
some fresh air. As it has been for ages since. Well since Constable Haywaining, and Wordsworth smoking. Come and see the vista, breathe in heartily, sop it up, and feel better. You will be fine, it is practically impossible to get lost, as it is not a wilderness in the slightest. There are no shepherds traversing the country along droveways. No open access even. No hoodies or suicide bombers. And all the damp hovels of the nineteenth century are now charming period cottages. You can win one today. A dream home. The power of rebranding... All normality is lost in a quagmire of preservationist, visual, neo-romantic tosh; manipulating the politics intertwined with the landscape. Edward, a Londoner’s poet, would not approve, yet is implicated, along with Aubrey, White, Cobbett, Hazlitt, Jefferies, Hardy, and Belloc. All reclaimed by the national park brigade to add credos to their creation. For better for worse.

After what seemed like an eternity walking a line. We reached the chalk-pit, climbed above and bent around it, on the anti whistle stop tour, Doug devised hours before. We stumbled across it in actuality; the accidental amphitheatre. The path, once a road, luckily led us to the lovely simple conversational poem. And it starts without warning, the talk of Edward transcending these hills. I remember a reverie I slipped into, in which I took the chalk by horse and cart to the steam train and beyond to the big industrial cities of the north. Crossing the park boundary every day, either empty or fully laden, back and forth the same way. Until it was mined no more just prior to the onset of the Boer War. It hurt losing such a job, which moments earlier I did not know I had. Silly reverie really, but looking down into the pit I wanted it to reopen dearly. Mining the chalk from the ground and the pit itself seemed to resonate with something deep inside me. Its closure left nothingness, a hole where something important to the local community once was. Only trees in a place which once rang loud with labour. Doug seemed to feel the same, silently staring away. It was not the poem though that got us on to Edward, rather something Doug had been thinking of for a while. Judging by the clear and concise way he
spoke, whilst facing toward the lifeless pit. The lack of men toiling busily below acted as a motivation to mention it then. What has haunted these hills ever since. The war in which Edward fought and died beside relatives of Doug. Doug told me when he walks these folds, for fleeting moments here and there, he is reminded of those victims of war, dear to him. This is not his motivation for walking. Although it is important for him to remember the dead when he does go out on the Hangers. For Doug then, the war poetry Edward wrote was more poignant at this point on our hike, and is perhaps always when wandering this landscape. This was despite the poetic site before us, which we had walked all day to reach, the tops of aspens at eye level, glaring away. Identity is ingrained in a landscape not when a new imaginary is imposed but through years of criss-crossing it. This is exactly what Doug has done. Intertwining his psyche with the creases of these hills that reside far from his natal home. To impose is to forget, to remove, to restrict, this individual memory making. The poetry of Edward and others written about these hills can in part provide too much for the wanderer, particularly when imposed, whereas the poetry he wrote at war does not. It challenges, opens-up, haunts, leaves the landscape to itself, further. We talked of war standing by the carved out mass of mud and chalk. Mud, Doug, Myself, and manmade hole in stillness without another soul present.

Not being a literary man, Doug enjoys poetry for what it is. He does not attempt to deconstruct it in any way and is simply stirred by the poetry Edward wrote before enlisting. For they are lovely accounts of the hills he loves, which echo over and over once home. Resonating with his own experiences of walking. Acting as little chambers, or impressions of his own life. The poetry Edward wrote about war is different. It is distant, far removed, and not in any way for Doug, like a site, such as the chalk-pit. Where words encouraging attachment are clamped to the earth, seeping from it, coiling around you, adding to the tone of a place. War poetry has exactly the opposite affect for someone, who does not know the horrors of war first hand. As they were never a part of a landscape as cold, bleak, numb, or desolate as that. Never present within it, to intertwine with the coils of place. Neither were the soldiers in many ways. Dead already. With only images, smells, sounds emblazoned in the memory afterwards. It is in this distancing though, as somebody with no experience of war, where Doug attempts to feel most empathy
with the soldier. It is suffering that he is glad not to be subjected to but feels he has to try to know something about. A forced understanding if you like, through walking, in order to honour the dead. Simultaneously distancing himself from the hero but trying to ascertain what it must have been like to be a cog in the industrial slaughter. What it must have been like to be a young man, swept up in a tide of jingoistic tosh, patriotic slogans, and propaganda. Like the war will be over by Christmas. Or fight to save the language of Keats and Shakespeare amongst gritty Saxon men. Leaving out the fact that the life expectancy of a soldier on the front line was measured in days. Doug, a military buff, knew that in 1917, the year Edward died, one and a half million soldiers were engaged in trench warfare. It was military deadlock, according to Doug. With four hundred miles of trenches, immovable caterpillars, inscribed across France and Belgium. Full of mud penetrating everything. Sleeping bag. Pyjamas. Socks. Men trudging through communication trenches of sucking clay, five feet deep. Their feet literally rotting away, going black and toes dropping off, whilst immersed in the water of a flooded trench. With no alternative but to wash their faces with snow, during the coldest winter in living memory. Waiting for the inevitable shell to thud before them. Or a chlorine gas canister to explode nearby causing them to drown in their own phlegm, or mustard gas to mist, disabling not killing, leaving them draining the state. Gas, gas, quick boys. An ecstasy of fumbling. And when they see the front line for the first time all they can do is wait for the terrifying call to go over the top. Through the barbed wire and machine guns and a wall of intense noise. Dull thuds of bullets cutting into flesh and the horrific hollow crashes of high explosives dropping overhead. Guffaw. Splutter. Zing, zing, zing. Whizzbang. Splosh. Stuttering shrill choirs. Until they were cut to pieces. Left as one of the unidentified dead, from every town, village, and city. You understand? I hope you don’t, said Doug, looking up at me. It is burned into the minds of survivors. With their faces half fallen off. Peeled away by shrapnel. Shell shock victims with tremors, loss of sensation, and headaches thanks to the intense stress of battle; knowing you could lose your life at any moment. Psychiatrists terrified them to restore function by giving them electric shock treatment. As if they had not been through enough already. We knew what poetry had done for these men. It had told their stories. Not what the people at home wanted to hear about the war. Poetry changed in these bleak years, got real and confronted the everyday routine. At that
moment the horrors of the trenches. Mimicking the staccato rhythms of war, and peace. Using brutal words, simple language. They died as cattle. Say it. Let anthems for doomed youth boom. Through translucent verse removed of flowery frill. Remove might and majesty also and tell the pity of war. As Owen, Brooke, McCrae, Sassoon, Sorley, Rosenberg, Thomas and West did to different extents. Most lost to the trenches. Writing the poetry of pity. Reliving their experiences, relaying them in words, which resonate with the common soldier. Who have no words to quantify their experiences being numb and desensitised and past all limits of abhorrence. Give them an unflinching depiction of war as they knew it. And the poetry will speak to every generation. Lines of graves, all the same, neat and pristine, tell something of a lie. We see only the sanitised aftermath. The number of dead. Millions. What we do not see is the torrid life of a soldier in a trench. Georgian poets allowed us to count the cost of war more accurately. Giving us an insight into the horrendous conditions of a conflict which still haunts the British imagination. Reminding us and other countries never to revel in the glory of war ever again. Never to fight for a notion of purity of nationality. The Great War hovers now on the precipice of living memory, as the final few British survivors of the conflict all died last year. Bill Stone, Henry Allingham, and Harry Patch, took their memories of the trenches to the grave. Art, poetry perhaps in particular, in blurring times and places, permits us to cling to and grasp these memories for a moment here and there. Private peaceful amongst the glorious dead, at the sounding of the last post, lest we forget. *The old lie; Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.*

I remember leaving the silent site, and continuing along the same route. Soon turning right and walking through the perfect line of bedraggled oaks. Although I cannot remember what we spoke of, at all, on the journey back to the church. After all the talk of war, we must have just enjoyed the silence, which was seemingly following us from the pit. Any conversation had been exhausted perhaps. Tiredness had taken hold. Thoughts of a sit down had entered our minds. I do not know. We had seen it all before for sure. Views which earlier in the day were awe inspiring, no doubt now appeared mundane. That is my guess anyway. A head down, pacy walk to the finish line, occurred. And banal thoughts of food emanated. Not before long, the church steeple could be seen in the distance. A landmark to orient ourselves. After walking due south,
as the crow flies, over the middle of pastoral fields flooded earlier in the week. We had paid little attention to our position on the map, for it was downhill all the way, from the poetic site, to our cars. Encouraging speed to build, focusing our minds on the end of the loop, one foot in front of the other, walking perfection. We knew we were going roughly in the right direction. Despite it not raining all day, village drains still seeped over and were forced wide by the camber. While runoff tinged with fertiliser confluenced from the farm above and also pursued us, babbling. Before getting into my car, Doug gave me a gift. It was a film he had made years ago about the Fellowship. Featuring Colin and Larry and the writers who never showed. I shook an outstretched hand and said I would see him next spring to complete my first ever birthday walk. It took a while to find my car key, I remember. It was somewhere amongst my belongings. Stuff that had been in the rucksack for years. Books left unread, blunt pencils, pens, notepad, sunglasses, half eaten apple, camera, dictaphone, sheets of crumpled paper. Below all that the shiny key. I watched Doug drive away and waved him off.

It turned out the car was merely an extension of the rucksack. I sat inside a giant mess of British sandwich boxes, bottles of French water, various items of clothing from all over, Turkish cigarette ends, empty Americano cardboard cups and Big Mac remains. And was glad to be back amongst these familiar surroundings; cosseted in controlled chaos. With everything at hand, sort of, becoming extensions of my body. Flotsam and jetsam picked up along the way from anonymous service stations. Necessary objects nowadays that most people identify with. The heater, set just how, fanned my face and hands, as I attempted a three point turn. It had to be curtailed, as I had a sweat on, after a day plodding all over London’s lungs. Orbiting closer to the west of the capital for a change of scenery, I pointed the car north east, and gunned it to reach the ring road. A few more notches up the green belt and I was off one of the many buckles, the a3, and on the dreaded Thatcher belt, the m25. Stuck on it, without the knowledge; the extent I had to traverse the curve. Excited voices boomed from a speaker by my foot. Somebody had scored in a football match somewhere. For a while the noise transported me from the supposedly placeless motorway, to a real place. A stadium, pie and bovril, singing. Car horns twittered, lights flickered, and I was lost again, drifting. It mattered not a jot. The numb
isolation was just what I needed after playing the role of a busybody all day, poking my nose in, strolling and speaking. Humming from the engine was constant. Though a symphony built itself when the car slinky closed up. And the radio crackled, beneath telegraph wires clipping the circle. The slinky stretched itself out again and the poetry in motion continued. I forgot about oppressive time, forgot about finite days, and reverted to a primordial innocence. Sauntering up the m25, suturing up, the city and the countryside, my northern and southern identity, poetry and place. The odd sensations persisted, whilst driving into the night, until I was suddenly allowed off the merry-go-round. And out of purgatory. It was a fair old poke compared to the direct route previously taken. I was at least on the home stretch, once off the road going nowhere and everywhere. The evening was cold and clear, for the first time in weeks. Stars seen anew and twinkling street lamps shimmered beyond the windscreen. And a silhouette of Oxford appeared on the horizon. Domes, spires, cubes, slightly darker than the polluted sky. My foot, sock, shoe assemblage did not move from the accelerator pedal. And crank shaft turned wheels, tyres, driving me across the tarmac at a constant speed. Until I twisted my ankle to the left and planted my leg down, to brake for a roundabout. Steering away from the university and on to the outskirts. Paying the car over a toll bridge. By placing five pence in the teenage hand, reaching out from a glass box. Crossing the still swollen river, its banks burst over and out across flood plains. Arriving too late for tea at what was then my second home. Passing a football pitch-pool, an abbey, a church, a pub, a shop, and a row of cottages lain on the roadside, before parallel parking. After my day flitting in and out of poetry, being an aesthetic decadent dandy. I needed to de-flaneur. Inside those four stone walls being under that slate roof was the perfect place to do such. I remember pushing at the door, knowing it would be off the latch. And expecting behind it an empty front room. Stepping in, the sofa sat there unused but lighted. All as predicted. The middle room was lifeless too, bar the quietly flickering open fire. A smell emanating from which, ever since associated with that grate. Rather than following the voices that could be overheard I climbed the steep uncarpeted stairs. Dropping my bag in the tiny bedroom full to the brim with knickknacks. Presents, accrued junk, and sentimental souvenirs from holidays past.
Grown attached to over time, leaving them scattered around, and unable to be thrown away. The cacti next to the bed which pricked my arm constantly whilst I slept were a favourite. Sat on the sill of a window once left open overnight, freezing my head. I went back downstairs, and entered the noisy kitchen. It was, as always, a hive of activity. The long table was surrounded with smiling faces, happy at my return. I stood by the Rayburn for a few moments to warm myself through. And described my day to people who were actually interested. Wine and food was given to me as well. Until I was happily full. Soon after I fell in to bed exhausted, beside the cacti. And the pretty, fun, girlfriend, C. Not to forget.

It does not seem real now. Rather a dream that someone else had. It was though, I just about remember, my perfect place, slowly becoming an important part of who I am. A half life largely disappeared today. Looking back, I used it to escape my original identity. My place of birth; an estate in a cotton town. Perhaps that sort of life was always too good for me. But it left its mark. She did. As did the house itself. In which I felt safe and content. The house where I reside now is cold, unwelcoming, and quiet. A little moustached cat is sitting on the wall outside. Warming, cheering, enchanting for just a few moments. Goodbye old life. Goodbye Rayburn, goodbye cacti, goodbye house, goodbye gin tears, forever. Stay emblazoned on my memory please. First love. It strikes me that we try to simplify our identity too much. Build up a notion of purity. Say who we are neatly, tidily. Create a maquette of dear old England, in ourselves and landscape. Despite most of our heritage being begged, borrowed and stolen from Greece, Italy, Germany, France, the USA... I was not always like this. A northern fairy. A mildly depressed drinker. I am made up, for better for worse, of my relations, my relationships. In which I lose myself. Lose sight of everything else. Identity is nothing else but this processual, relational mêlée. The phone calls soon stop and people fade away, upon which sickly, soppy, shit begins to be written down. Place is much the same. In a crisis, always manufactured, sickly shit starts to be asserted. Boundary lines are drawn up through posh geography, relying on a basic formulation of social constructionism. In a grandiose manner for grandiose fancies. Usually bourgeois, high-brow, pompous, pretentious, and snobbish. Filled to the brim with flamboyant, fractuous, self aggrandising allegories. Constructing the prophetic argument of a propaganda machine. Playing
on the simmering tensions of a heightened symphony. Perpetuating an anxiety of the present, and class and race divisions. Unwittingly caught up in this and harked back to, in a narrow, selectively picked cultural heritage, are poetry and paintings of landscape, becoming surrogates of power. They do not define who we are any more than football does. In spite of the reductionist sanitising efforts of many, over the years. Nation building, region building, is always problematic, as evoked are place, identity, and culture, all never pure from their inception. Absolute rule, absolute geography, is a divisive fantasy, and can result in conflict.

Poetry and painting should be redemptive practices, in the service of society, as they were when Wilfred Owen and Paul Nash were around. I realised this to a greater extent than before whilst on my walk with Doug. And knew that after walking and talking with him, a mis-guide to landscape, or an anti-topographic, anti-lebensraum, topological mapping project had to be undertaken. And that the quixotic journeying done should be seen as a metaphor for life, because at the heart of the human condition is imperfection, unstructured mess; there is no equilibrium, no self regulating system, simply, lots and lots of stuff.

Preston, July 2010
Fellowship: the birthday loops

'We are five friends, one day we came out of the house one after the other, first one came, and placed himself beside the gate, then the second came, and placed himself near the first one, then came the third, then the fourth, then the fifth. Finally we all stood in a row. People began to notice us, they pointed at us and said: Those five just came out of that house. Since then we have been living together; it would be a peaceful life if it weren’t for a sixth one continually trying to interfere. He doesn’t do us any harm, but he annoys us, and that is harm enough; why does he intrude where he is not wanted? We don’t know him and don’t want him to join us. There was a time, of course, when the five of us did not know one another, either; and it could be said that we still don’t know one another, but what is possible and can be tolerated by the five of us is not possible and cannot be tolerated with this sixth one. In any case, we are five and don’t want to be six. And what is the point of this continual being together anyhow? It is also pointless for the five of us, but here we are together and will remain together; a new combination, however, we do not want, just because of our experiences. But how is one to make all this clear to the sixth one? Long explanations would also amount to accepting him in our circle, so we prefer not to explain and not to accept him. No matter how he pouts his lips we push him away with our elbows, but however much we push him away, back he comes.'

(Fellowship, Franz Kafka)

I had not met The Edward Thomas Fellowship, as a whole before. And was a little worried that they may not accept me, as with the type of insular looking fellowship that Franz Kafka describes, in his short story: Fellowship - an outsider trying to infiltrate a literary walking group that had been walking roughly the same loop for thirty years to celebrate the birthday of a dead poet. From the initial excursions undertaken, in the summer of 2008, with Colin and Larry, Doug, and the no-show writers, I had gained a sense that the Fellowship was a tight-knit
community of ramblers and academic sorts. As with the story of fellowship described by Franz Kafka; in the accepting there will always be a sense of separating me out from the real group. Getting special dispensation, or acknowledgement on arrival, in much the same way Jacques Derrida describes the act of being hospitable to a newcomer, would distinguish me. It did not help that I was researching them, the literary society, either. In all probability they would be wary around me, just in case I wrote anything about them, which could potentially damage the family they have created. But I did not want to alter the dynamic, so decided to keep my head down and wander amongst the line rather than sticking to the people previously walked with. This soon went out of the window on arrival though as you can imagine, given my age and obvious outsider status - clothing, hair, and notepad. I have completed three of these birthday walks now, and am left with an awkward predicament: when I think back, all the walks merge into one. I have tried to separate them out but each loop is proving extremely difficult to tell apart. I know roughly the same amount of people were present on each of the walks. And that mostly the same people returned year on year, as far as I can remember, to participate. The weather always seemed to be cold but sunny too, due to it being early March. We definitely took in the memorial stone and most of his houses in the morning, without fail. And in the afternoon we would take a random route devised by one of the locals. Not Doug. It is strange that I am failing so miserably to pick these three days, one each year, apart. The drive to and from the South Downs is at present more memorable. Maybe that is not so much of a surprise, as I set off from Exeter one year, Aberystwyth another, and London finally. The loop around Steep was always very similar from one year to the next. There is a general sense that I have of each walk that can be tapped in to (one was with my ex girlfriend, C, in early March 2009; one was after a death, in early March 2010; and one was prior to cycling In Pursuit of Spring, in early March 2011). Other than that though, nothing makes sense. Stopping points along the way, affective sensations, could have happened on any of the meets. In an attempt to jog my memory, I am going to write up the three car journeys taken to Steep, for the birthday celebration. This may turn into a wild goose chase where the three days are bastardised, thanks to my poor memory, and intertwined. Or what may happen is that through remembering back to the separate car journeys, each birthday is allowed to continue on, as it happened.
The walk was an important milestone. Begrudgingly we got to our feet. C endearingly bedraggled from the night before, hand searching for the door handle, half asleep, coaxing her towards the shower, promising that the pretentious chortling would not last all day. The car seat was uncomfortable and the suspension hard. And the engine deafening at high speeds on the rough old tarmac. At least I did not have to drive in the early hours, feeling wretched, on the hitchhike in question. We filled up with water, coffee, and croissant, before slipping on to the a303. The route was direct, along no motorways, and traffic free - a nice Sunday morning drive, rather than a day of research. Lucky someone else was there, as, as an outsider I didn’t want to make a big entrance alone. We must have talked but of what. I think we argued over my map reading abilities. That was a given on all long car journeys. We became quite excited at the sight of Stonehenge, I recall. It was the first time I had seen it and I was surprised by the proximity of the road. I thought of Tess being forced up the mound to one of the toppled standing stones. Laying on it and committing suicide. Raped by the landed gentry and then left alone to bring up the child; the snide comments from all and sundry about her being a supposed slut, becoming too much. I left my first love on one of those stones too. For this was to be our last walk together. Not that I knew it at the time but everything would go downhill from there. I have no one else to blame but myself though. In no time at all, we were pootling up the high street in the little silver bubble of a car that so suited her. Surfing sticker in the back window so it could be spotted in a crowd, hub cap missing. It stood out on arrival, and turned heads, being much older than all the others in the car park. There were a few surprised looks given our age too. I think they thought we were reporters from the local newspaper to begin with. Colin greeted us though and cheerfully welcomed us in, explaining who we were in our matching grey coats, and why we had come. More on this birthday later…
I had snorted methadrone all night and played poker. It was morning before I forced myself to sleep. I was a year older and single. And had spent the last six months drinking myself into an early grave, writing depressing poems, and reading philosophy. Dropping names and pretending to know more than I actually did. Like Dean Moriarty and Carlo Marx do On the Road. Life as façade; free and easy - I appeared reasonably happy to those who met me during those dark months but that couldn’t have been further from the truth. I was supposed to be at a conference in Aberystwyth, but decided to sleep through the final day to recover in time for the birthday walk. It was a horrible come down, being sat on my own for large parts of the day in a cottage on the edge of the town. I stared at my phone, hoping someone would remember me. The one person who I wanted to did not - my heroine, C. It was a clear day and the stars - the souls of dead poets - that I saw last night more vividly than ever before in my life, would no doubt be back. Messengers: ontologically intriguing and expounding the human relationship with the infinite universe - stars amongst other stars, amongst more stars. They provided a shock of the poetic, when for a fleeting moment I glimpsed the world through the eyes of a poet, and it seemed as if politics needed the magical touch of dream and desire, or creative expression - grandiose fancies perhaps, when conducting a minor poetic experiment, infiltrating upper-class society. In the forlorn state I had got myself in; perhaps it was only my world that wanted poetry more than ever, for medicinal purposes, wanting the truth that only poetry can give in distilling experience. I couldn’t continue to draw poetry from the past though, from my muse; my world needed a new language of revolution, a poetry for my future, a Gramscian cathartic moment where it is possible to change the world I occupy without taking power. The valley to the sea drew me forth and I attempted to make something of my day. Chiefly: eating something for the first time in about thirty hours. By this point in the day though it would have to be some mangled meat in a bun; some fat in a tray establishment, to keep the depression at bay. Aberystwyth had plenty of these but feeling a little adventurous and still glazed over and unbalanced from the night before, I walked past all of them and into a pub. The feeling of having to concentrate on my body so much, to merely move through the city streets, forced me
to look harder at the pavement, the bright head lights, far off the sea, in only the way a terrible hangover, come down, can - I could, at that point after many small acts of mimicry, understand why Coleridge used opium to induce a state of poeticy, where poesis becomes possible and the senses are noticeably distributed, for a change. After a pint I regained some composure and food was once again put off. It was the only thing to do after six months solid drinking, drink some more. Otherwise I would have to face reality and the fact that I had let my work slide, my girlfriend go, and my body wither. After one pint I moved on to spirits, as I had become accustomed to doing. Then I was tempted by some wine. I did at least get some cheese with the house red. And after that it was time to make the lonely walk back to the cottage. Senses dulled enough to not over think my repetitive life. And most importantly, I was now able to sleep. Morning broke and it was inevitably sunny yet cold. And the head was looking tired and old, in the slither of mirror hanging from the windscreen. I could not be late, as there was an email from Colin explaining of a sudden death. The president had died; a relation of Edward Thomas. A sombre mood would descend over Steep.
2011

Off to Steep again, for my final birthday walk. I must have absorbed some of the stuff I had been told or read, as I was finally eager to talk poetry. The following day I was to be riding *In Pursuit of Spring*, and was intrigued to see what the *Fellowship* would make of the recycling. Furthermore I was clean; and the dark day’s initially enabling writing poetry mostly of a lost love, as a form of catharsis, had gone to an extent. It was less of a constant hum, more a sudden shock of the past now that haunted my present. Unfortunately my final birthday walk was to be one of those occasions when faded memories were lit once more, with the poetic loop unsurprisingly leading to the past. Inevitably memories, altered over time, to become no more than spiralling dream like loops, out of control, leaving me unsure about what exactly happened: romanticising the past. The day started well enough; it was sunny and cold in Clapham, from where I would be setting off by bicycle *In Pursuit of Spring* the next morning. There was no hangover to write of and no issues with getting lost, what with a borrowed sat nav. I was directed from Nightingale Lane to the a3 following to begin with the same route Edward did to Guildford on his first day *In Pursuit of Spring*. I checked out cycle paths for the majority of the journey, planning the lengthy excursion. As it turned out the route taken by Edward in 1913 through Morden and Merton had become a *Barclays Cycle Superhighway*. Billed as a fast, direct route in to Central London. Putting one in mind of a bygone age of extensive road building; across the plains of America. A motorway for the bicycle. Negating the need to negotiate the city the more and more it is extended and perfected. Until the bicycle becomes as car like as possible and the cycle path as road like as possible. And the commuter embraces a more intensive method of being mobile. Well that is the hope of the planners. Wide cycle paths flanked busy roads, albeit in the gutter for the large part, leaving me with a calming sense of optimism, as I passed cyclist after cyclist. I turned off the Coleridge pilgrimage trail after Merton to join the a3, unaware as a result of the tortuous Surrey Hills that I would face the next day. It was less than an hour to Petersfield. To get in the mood I switched on *Radio 4*. A profile of John Galliano was airing. Talk of troubled genius abounded, as the car continued down the road. An anti-Semitic tirade in a Paris bar his final undoing apparently - resulting in dismissal
from Dior. This piece was trailed by the shipping forecast. The programmes merged into a sailor-chic catwalk show for a while, with blue and white stripes criss-crossing. Ultra-skinny models mingled with bearded salty sea-dogs, until the forecast stopped and the mental mapping receded. A tall blonde girl appeared on my horizon from nowhere. It was my ex girlfriend, C. I could see her in that long grey coat lent against her car, parked in the same spot as two years ago…
I followed C in her grey coat to the entrance of a school, whereupon we witnessed our first ritual reading of the day. A seated lady with two sticks and an old edition of the collected poems spoke softly. It was difficult to hear all of what was said but everybody crowded round looked suitably deep in thought. Not one of his famous poems - one for the connoisseurs of Thomas. I had never heard it before but enjoyed it nonetheless. And hoped all of the readings would be equally new to me. Before we set out on the walk leaving behind the seated lady, a team photo was taken. As bit part players we stood to the side and back, shunning the chance to take centre stage. I think they wanted to show that there was a young contingent and eventually placed us nearer to the middle than we ought to have been. We had become members in a click and a flash - part of the real *Fellowship*, not one of the few hundred online, but the walkers: the preservationists. I wondered if this would compromise my research. It would be difficult to be critical of their methods of poeticising landscape, binding place and poetry, if I became too friendly. After all a poem is not simply a description of a place but so much more. A summary of the rough-circle seeped over the rustling outdoor coats to our ears and in single file we walked-with. It was a surprise to me that the house where *Old Man* still grew and the pub beside which the *Aspens* were talking, were walked by. Instead we walked directly to a poetic site pre-picked by Anne - the readings organiser - where the next reading would take place. I overheard some fellows whisper *Old Man*, a few even walked down the garden path but the majority kept pace down the pavement. After turning right at the *Aspens*, the road arced to the left and we crossed a stile, causing a backlog, into a muddy field. The shaky, slippery bit of wood stopped everyone in their tracks and was often only cleared with the help of another. Still they are such odd dangerous little things that to replace it with a gate would spoil the fun. The one in question had nowhere to put a hand and had curls of barbed wire ready to prick with the slightest slip. Trying a different method we stepped over front on rather than side on. A method which could have resulted in falling face first into churned up mud. As it was, we made it look ridiculously easy to straddle. Through the hedgerow and into another field, and the Shoulder was visible. Colin and Larry, Doug and the writers, were not. Just lots of colourful backs: blues, reds, and
yellows mainly, with the occasional classy gent in a tweed number. The flat lush grass - a
butchers block - gave on to the Shoulder, lain on its side; meat to the left as we looked, bone to
the right. We headed for the bone - shallower to ascend - forgetting as we walked across open
landscape the trawl of driving to Steep, and even began to enjoy one of our only walks in the
countryside together. It was useful to have another person there also, to use the video camera
and take photos, leaving me free to scribble notes, snoop and earwig. As we began to ascend a
track up the Shoulder, over rough sharp little stones, I realised where it was we were headed:
*The Chalk Pit*. My research assistant for the day began filming as soon as we stopped beside the
poetic-site. A black Labrador dragging a stick through the gaggle of bodies is followed intently
for a minute or so by all, before Anne, our poetic receptacle for the day, joked - not a *small
brown bitch, with spots of blue that hunted in a ditch*, unfortunately - some laughter followed by
those who either knew, or pretended to know, what she meant. I was expecting to hear the
poem, *The Chalk Pit*, so was confused by the quip. Some of the words - of the poem we were
about to hear - had been changed by Anne: poetic licence. *Man and Dog* was the name of it.
What it had to do with the pit was beyond me. Although what the first poem had to do with the
posh school was also unapparent. Perhaps the walks were not for the enjoyment of the mere
linking of a poem to the place described within it; the detective work - the uncovering and
demystifying of a poem, making it instantly and easily tangible - so much after all. And it was
not about the precise site and subsequent siting through the performing of the poem but the
broader landscape wandered and loved by Edward that they wished to experience and get at.
The *Fellowship* were evoking attachment differently than I imagined; more subtly and
subconsciously, less formulaic, with words being dragged seemingly from a representational
ether and retold at will - a veritable atmosphere of poetry created by, tapped into and shared
through; not a few poems dotted about and stumbled across, found by the eagle-eyed, set in
stone, tree, river, dog… place. The crowd witnessed some amateur dramatics, once Anne passed
over the reins. Two men played the parts - one pretended to be Edward, the other a *man staring
up at the mistletoe*, whom Edward came across whilst walking and started up a conversation
with. Edward began: *Twill take some getting.* Man staring up at the mistletoe: *Sir, I think ‘twill
so.* Both actors looked up into the aspens of the chalk-pit, rustling in the wind. Actor playing
Edward dressed in a scarf and blazer, satchel, speaking in an accent slightly too received for the poet continued the tale. The other actor bearded and fleeced, jumped in enthusiastically at points in a rich Somerset tone with a line here and there: *If I flew now, to another world I’d fall.* They gestured towards the drop, down in to the pit, where *Stig* could live. The crowd were silent waiting to hear of the next move the conversation would take. They talked of sleeping outdoors, or in barns, whilst walking long distances. Man staring up at mistletoe: *Many a man sleeps worse tonight than I shall.* Edward: *In the trenches.* Of course! And then I recalled what Doug had said the last time I stood in this spot looking down in to the pit, about the war. The war looms over this little bit of Hampshire and the *Fellowship* know it. They continue to loom it against the pit into which I stared, against the shoulder, against Steep - reminding visitors of the great loss, inscribing Edward Thomas into stone where possible. Edward Thomas, one of the War Poets. The well-spoken actor slowed for dramatic effect looked deep into the trees before ending: *Together in the twilight of the wood.* I saw Doug on the other side of the crowd in contemplative mode. Clapping reverberated around the pit. The three minutes waiting were up. The walking leader, not Anne, - the reading leader - beckoned us on immediately, as if the *Fellowship* were consciously separating out the poems from the ‘real’ landscape and the walkers from the listeners. We followed. I thanked Anne for selecting a poem which is not simply about placing poetry, as so often happens, spoiling the poems for me, curtailing imaginings of Edward’s places. This landscape is not a distinct poetic region, where all poetry does is aid a form of dwelling, and constructs place. It is a violent act to argue so. It is perhaps the exclusivity of the region and - with the power of capitalism to degrade the seemingly non-useful - the way the poetry is received, which allows for this to happen; and the region to appear as *Thomas Country.* Yet Steep today is not distinct from the era of capitalism, geopolitics, globalisation, suicide bombers, unemployment, war, climate change etc. This is the fallacy of the rural idyll, of poetry when all it becomes about is intimate attachment to place. There is a dislocation, a magical nonsensical trait which poetry at its best possesses, challenging the idea of a central and a peripheral culture, a countryside and a city, a past and a present, a real and an imagined. To research the rural is not to abstract yourself from the everyday life of being wound into a capitalist society. Moments where the *Fellowship* remind the ramblers of war in a pretty
little village are an example of this quirk of spatiality, of poetics. And a reminder of the ridiculousness and danger of politics when it is characterised by and argued to be about only a few moments and a few events, undertaken by and committed upon a few individuals in certain large cities - missing out and glossing over the continued objective, systematic, and anonymous repetitive violence; this is the violent act of capitalism for Žižek. Poetry about the countryside is never just about the countryside, it is informed by many things, times, and places. When Edward Thomas was writing, the war, and the industrial revolution focused his mind, although they were not all that he wrote poetry against, as a creative political act. His poems are cultural and metaphysical musings, ecological diversions. Hardy and Auden admired Thomas for this. So did Joseph Brodsky. Few poets have been such a muse to other poets; Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, Robert Crawford, Gillian Clarke and Paul Muldoon have all written of their admiration for Thomas, as Edna Longley notes in a newspaper article. What needs to be reiterated about poetry and its relation to place is that on occasion poetry can become more than the place it purports to describe, and can outlive place if it continues to be read. And in relation to this piece of work; not only a place which has a poem written about it is poetic, like the event poetry is imminent, poetics and subsequent poesis is the ever-present that capitalism cannot shake.
Nobody much talks about poetry whilst walking to the memorial stone, in this most dark of lanes tangled thick with old man’s beard. When the sun emerges through the gaps in the trees we sop up the heat; out from beneath our tree tunnel. Yellow archangel and germander speedwell flank the path, netted by a tangle of climbing creepers, writhing and hugging trunks and branches. And ramsons - wild garlic - sting the nostrils from the damp bank behind; their pollen blotted into my face, nose, and a tingling sensation persisted. Rubbing away at the underside of my nose just about curtailed a sneeze - if I sneeze once I sneeze all day, continuously: hay fever. Clambering down to the memorial stone to a view now so familiar after the walks with Colin, Larry, and Doug - spoilt somewhat by the gaggle of bodies crawling about it - we sat in a carpet of wildflowers and waited for a poem to be performed. Cowslips, sun spurge, speedwell, and bugle, intermingled with blossoms on the guilder rose and hawthorn. The poem was read more solemnly by Anne, who placed a daffodil upon the stone mid-way through. I struggle to remember the entire poem, although I know what it was about. It was by Wendy Cope and called *At Steep*. Apparently she is hot on copyright, according to Anne, and it is not published on the internet, so I have to paraphrase. Wendy was walking to the memorial stone with Lachlan MacKinnon. The poets *stumbled down the sloping path* to the stone. Once there Wendy begins to converse with Edward, noting *there is no sign on road or path to say it’s there but walkers pass this way and learn your name and pilgrims clutching leaflets come from time to time walk half a mile to sit by your stone and keep you company for a while*. The poem ends: *Your spirit lives, it brought us here; you cannot know and never will.* Insects flew from flower to flower - an orange-tip butterfly and a blue one swapped heliport. A cardinal beetle on the wing, danced with the flotillas of beech leaves above our heads: peridot green. Birdsong cocooned us and the poem ended. Our service to commemorate Edward conducted by the stone bearing his name - dug into the side of his hill twenty years after his death in 1937, and unveiled by Walter de la Mere: done for another year. We departed; most took to the trail and scrambled down the escarpment, C and I, holding hands, ran atop the grassy verge back to the posh school, having not signed up for lunch.
We milled around in the car park for a bit before eating a pack up. Eventually plucking up enough courage to enter the room in the school, in which lunch was taking place. I chatted to Larry for a bit about the day and looked at the books for sale - some first editions; *The Icknield Way*, and *In Pursuit of Spring*, dotted amongst the books of poems. Colin was a very busy man and had little time to talk but we agreed to speak after the annual general meeting in the church.

At about two people began to assemble again outside the entrance of the school. Once everyone had collected themselves we walked in single file towards Berryfield Cottage. The location specified by the loop leader, who led the way himself, going in more or less the same direction as on the morning loop, crossing fields thick with dandelion, until the small farmhouse was in view, standing on the rise of a winding lane, in front of the bare slope where the memorial stone sat - juniper bushes, fir trees, and beeches banking the river of grass. The yew tree by the gate of the house, where two cocker spaniels yapped at each other; once housed a gold crested wren.

Edward and Helen moved to the house from Elses Farm, Kent, in 1908. It was their first house in the area; to which they moved for the school we had just walked from, as it was a progressive, co-educational one, the countryside, and the proximity to London, family and editors, travelled to by railway a mile distant. More wisteria and a thriving clematis, montana rubens, dangled from the cottage, as it seemed to at every cottage in the village. The pantiles made it look as if it has always been a part of the landscape; or at least a part of the landscape for longer than Edward and his poetry. And may blossom, early yet delightful, sprayed flowers that arched from the trees like sea spume, while we gathered on the quiet road. The family had wished to stay in the flint and brick structure for longer than the two years they did. Flint was let into the pointing, making it look as if the house was nailed together. This was not why they left. They could not afford to buy the property when it was put up for sale and had to move. Two readings took place in the garden, both explaining the love they had for the house and their sadness on having to leave. One was a letter written by Edward, sent to Gordon Bottomley, the other an extract from *World Without End*, the book written by Helen Thomas following the death of her husband at war. These readings were less inspiring than earlier in the day. And the readers were less animated. It was just after lunch, and everyone was most likely, a bit tired. The group felt flat though, with little talking amongst stopping points and only a few solitary
claps post reading. The letter was never meant for public consumption, so the lack of joviality could be explained by that. But it seemed to be more than that, as if the afternoon walk was a bit of an add-on, pointless perhaps, always changing. Not the real deal: the morning memorial walk, undertaken routinely, traditionally, the same loop each year, on the same weekend. Still, we pushed on, to the next reading point. Two Yew Tree Cottages: The final reading point of the day in fact and the last house Edward and Helen and their children lived in together. Not that they knew this on moving in. Edward would go to barracks in Essex on enlisting in 1916. The rent was three shillings a week and Edward retained his study in The Bee House for 1 shilling a week. This was to be the most creative period of his life. One hundred and thirty of the one hundred and forty four poems he wrote were written while he lived in the house - although most were composed in his study. After spraining his ankle whilst walking up the Shoulder one day though, he was forced to stay in the house for eighteen days, and in that time wrote fourteen poems. The president of the Fellowship, Edward Cawston Thomas, son of Mervyn, son of Edward, informed us of this before unveiling a new plaque, at a cost of five hundred and sixty three pounds paid for through donations from members of the Fellowship. The final plaque of its kind, as the other houses where Edward lived already had his name inscribed upon them - bar the forgotten house down the Cowley Road, Oxford. Poet is enough of a description nowadays, in spite of the relatively small proportion of his life given over to writing poetry. Edward also told us of his fond memories of his auntie Myfanwy, who at the age of four and a half was immortalized in verse by her father, writing Old Man, on the 6th December 1914. The dark yew overhung the garden, a symbol perhaps of the onset of war, along with a hedge of tall wild damsons, where a nightingale sang once. Rosemary, thyme, lavender, bergamot, and old man, the herbs Edward loved still grew sporadically in the now overgrown little patch. Plaque unsheathed, poem at the ready, Edward passed over to Colin to finish the walking and reciting for the day. On this occasion the poem was placed and Old Man was read with a little rub of the stuff for good measure. Poem and place united, crumpled together once more through the labour of the Fellowship, things, the same things, poetry is place, place is poetry, all is becoming - well it may be figured as such on a day such as the one described: a poetic trap perhaps, a patriotic attachment evoked, easily fallen into. A quick read of the poem informs otherwise - the favorite
poem of Andrew Motion. Old Man dislocates, disrupts place, and renders elusive, transports you elsewhere. Why are we reading it in-place then, placing it, siting it? We were not there. We are not here. Poetry read in place, the place which the poem describes, is often poetry out of place - it was never meant to be read as such: reuniting the poem with the garden and the shrub was oddly disorientating - typical Thomas to do such a thing with his verse; his gift to poets since. With the work of poets who lack this quality, I could understand this amalgamating work the Fellowship undertake more; as with some poems, presence is, or can be grasped on the hearing - or at least is attempted or thought to have been grasped - inside the site from which it was originally conceived. The poems of Edward Thomas are in the main unhappy and tend to wriggle about, on their returning home.

Tea and cakes made by the old dears greeted us in the Church of All Saints, Steep. The annual general meeting was about to get underway. I was not expecting such a formal corporate format, of voting in, seconding motions, and note taking. The president Edward Cawston Thomas chaired, with Colin the honorary secretary sat to one side and Larry the honorary treasurer and membership secretary on the other. Work done over the past year, such as the grafting and mounting of plaques, new members enlisted, weekends away, study days, walks, were all costed and formatted into a neat little table for us to peruse. I had my hands on the innards. Not only that I got a mention in the summing up of the year to date. Colin describing my work in great detail to the bemused crowd of fifty or so as excellent news - young blood coming through, interested in Edward Thomas, the next generation and all that. Red faced, I turned to C who was beaming, proud of my achievement and acknowledgement. I felt bad as I was still not a member. Not paid up to be there - freeloading on the back of their knowledge for my own ends. Becoming a member may change the way I think and write though. I resolved not to become one of them, just in case. But smiled sheepishly none the less and thanked Colin for his kind words. Just when we thought the day was over and we could head back home, we were treated to another load of amateur dramatics. The acting-readings were about the death and loss of Edward; war and the loss for this landscape. The haunting of this landscape by a dead poet persists thanks, in no small part to this noble band and their noise, music, chorus; This is no case
of petty right or wrong That politicians or philosophers Can judge. I hate not Germans, nor
grow hot With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers. Beside my hate for one fat patriot My
hatred of the Kaiser is love true: - A kind of god he is, banging a gong. But I have not to choose
between the two, Or between justice and injustice. The poem left a lack, a lag in time, where
some action is awaited but does not arrive, the resurrection of the messiah perhaps. No, another
unfortunate state of emptiness is present, brought about by the removal of God, and the
subsequent opening out of meaning. Edward being absent but still always traceable there, an
absent-presence: a poet. What else bar God can tinge landscape in such a way as a poet? Make
us view the contours of the hills and buildings, see the streams, skies, roads, and trees, watch the
rats and badgers differently. Make us miss them and their words. It is there in so many
landscapes: the loss; after the death of a poet. The event does not make the landscape; it is all
that the landscape is - immanent and constantly becoming. Poetry interplays, conceals and
highlights the event. It tinges, becomes memory, sense and nonsense, the event itself. The actors
strode the boards at the front of the small church, as if they were treading some hallowed planks
- projecting their voices via the south and north aisles, and forcing words between stone pillars,
booming anthems from spire to chancel, nave to chapel. Dinned With war and argument I read
no more Than in the storm smoking along the wind Athwart the wood. Two witches' cauldrons
roar. The cold heavy acoustics, only sacred buildings seem to have, helped - and the vestiges of
war being read with aplomb, a poem, hung. From one the weather shall rise clear and gay; Out
of the other an England beautiful And like her mother that died yesterday. The master of
ceremonies continued to channel Edward, speaking with his tongue, summoning his spirit for
the rest of the cult - resurrecting him on holy grounds, like some form of black magic. Little I
know or care if, being dull, I shall miss something that historians Can rake out of the ashes
when perchance The phoenix broods serene above their ken. But with the best and meanest
Englishmen I am one in crying, God save England, lest We lose what never slaves and cattle
blessed. Dr John Dee paced around up top before me, C, and the Fellowship. Edward the new
messiah - worshiped, martyred, saintly. The ages made her that made us from dust: She is all we
know and live by, and we trust She is good and must endure, loving her so: And as we love
ourselves we hate our foe. God well and truly vanquished, exiled, never to be heard from again.
Working them up to a frenzy; at the front the ringleaders, stuck the knife in and hammered home poetry with its new found power, in the face of a weakened God. Spat on the Holy Spirit in its own back yard. Set it alight. Watched it go up in flames and evaporate. They recited more and more and more poetry; poked the remains with a stick. In the church of all saints, the words began to make the ears bleed. It became too much for me and C and we tried not to listen - preferring to nod off. It was no use though; the words filtered through the godless void, filling the space, and seeped beyond the stained glass windows, off to the hills. Occultist goings on in the church down at Steep, no residue or remnant left as they closed their book of spells, only a cleft where God once resided in our heads. Edward tinges this part of England, and only Edward seemingly, if what we had just witnessed from the Fellowship is anything to go by - no mention of Jesus at all - Edward and his poetry adorned the stained glass window beside me, and he had his death and scriptures retold. Still Edward was a bit of a pagan. These rituals perhaps reflect that. A yearly trip is much like a sacrifice to the sun, a pilgrimage for Mother Nature; a sacrifice to Edward, god of all that these hills cosset. In return you receive eternal peace and happiness by simply reading his poems. Quite appropriate then that it was the first time I had seen Stonehenge, on the day of my first birthday walk with The Edward Thomas Fellowship. In keeping with that fateful day, in the following weeks I sought somehow, for some unknown reason to sacrifice true love - C; my hippy. Hard to imagine that in this post-political, apathetic, technological age, in which poetry itself is weakened, more indeed than God despite religious apartheid, Darwin and Hawking, someone could do such a thing for it; for poetry, or at least for the state of mind needed to be able to write poetry. Being a contented soul does not lend itself to writing poetry. Poetry was not the cause though, it did not bring about the event - nothing can bring about the event, no piece of art, no intervention, no poem; it is always immanent. Poetry was the result of the event of being alone for the most part of this unfinished journey, and stuck in the past - a lonely place to reside, or even wander with Edward alongside retorting, the past is the only dead thing that smells sweet.
It was a sad day. The *Fellowship* were going through the motions. There was a silent huddle, solemn faced, already stood by the school when I arrived in his spiritual home, all the way from his ancestral home. I was not sure whether I should be there on such an occasion and resolved to keep quiet. I did not greet anybody and nobody greeted me. I stood at the back of the crowd and waited for something to happen. Whispers of the shock news permeated through the group, until all had removed their cheerful grins. Colin then began with a eulogy of sorts for Edward Cawston Thomas, grandson of Edward Thomas and the president of *The Edward Thomas Fellowship*, who had died suddenly two days earlier - acknowledging all the hard work that Edward, as president, had taken on over the years, keeping the *Fellowship* going and growing. He had been president, since the death of the youngest daughter of Edward Thomas; Myfanwy Thomas. I am not sure how long ago that was, although she would have been a hundred this year. Colin spoke for a few minutes before stating that it is fitting that the walk is going ahead as a tribute. It is what he would have wanted, to be remembered alongside his grandfather, in a place they both loved dearly. It was to be a tribute loop for two men today then, not the usual, one. Edward had died again, as he did every year, but this year the walk was different. The poet was faded out, pushed into the background. His poems were read with a different man in mind, a friend of so many assembled beside the school. Colin - the pain in his face, there for everyone to see - finished eulogizing and handed over to the first reader. I thought better of taking notes or recording, thinking it too disrespectful. Instead I listened to the words like never before stood in the midst of an epic silence. I did not try to make sense of the words sent my way, just heard their syllables come harshly forth and gradually wane in intensity. It was very short, and over before I knew it, and fathomed its purpose. I could do no more if I wanted to, being still a little spaced out, and dog tired from the long drive; with an alcoholic weakness to my muscles, cognition was impossible. As far as I can remember, the first reading, by the school, was *In Memoriam*, one of the war poems - which would make sense, in the fact that it is both short and fitting: *The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood* *This Eastertide call into mind the men,* *Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should Have gathered them and will do never*
again. There was no need to tell the crowd, all regulars, in which direction to walk. People, as always, turned and made for the school gates, headed for the shoulder and the stone. Most nobody spoke and nobody smiled until the vista expanded and enveloped - the familiar ridge drawing chatter and laughter from some. It encouraged a few of the less influential fellows to feel at ease - perhaps wary of upsetting the committee members, by treating it as any old birthday walk - and it was not long until all the minions strolled and photographed freely, in their pursuit of the summit. I was still wary though of offending, being a complete outsider or worse still a suspected reporter, and tried not to walk in my usual way - sticking at the back and keeping my head down, instead of zigzagging the line, snooping. It gave me time, without focusing on anything in particular, to look and think - I thought of nothing in particular either; thoughts nevertheless always inevitably migrate back to C. Having walked this landscape with her in her grey coat, a year prior, it is perhaps no surprise. I have come to the borders of sleep, The unfathomable deep Forest where all must lose Their way, however straight, Or winding, soon or late; They cannot choose. It makes no difference as to whether I am in the city or the country, somewhere I visited with her, or somewhere I have not, sleeping or awake, somehow I will be reminded. This walk was therefore no different to any other hour experienced since, despite looping the loop: the feedback loop. Numbed back then by continued alcohol abuse thoughts soon migrated on to something else no doubt, such as the next drink. And we were at the summit. Here love ends, Despair, ambition ends, All pleasure and all trouble, Although most sweet or bitter, Here ends in sleep that is sweeter Than tasks most noble. I had spoken to nobody; just walked at the set pace, and if it looked like there was about to be a traffic jam - as there was at the summit of the shoulder, were the next reading would take place - dawdled at the back so as to, not to have to begin speaking. It made sense on such a day to be skulking in the shadows of the Fellowship, with a nondescript head in a book of poems or looking into the middle distance. I did not break with the Downs and turn to watch the reader by the stone. There is not any book Or face of dearest look That I would not turn from now To go into the unknown I must enter and leave alone I know not how. The ethereal voice wisped away at the hairs on the back of my neck. Without a face speaking them, the words were free to play with the view bordering my eye balls. There was no need to watch the movement of the mouth, the pursing of
lips, or acting eyes, making words; the words were already made by the poet a century earlier. I heard the moment of creation, in looking away. And gazed at the landscape: its face and my face, face to face, for the entire poem. The words sprouted from the ground and internalised the mostly green, brown, and blue vision, until I was no longer face on, looking down upon landscape, but stepped inside it, face to face with the poem. Comforted by it, the new view, and warmed by the words, as I suspected the rest were, and were regularly when wandering these hills, not a bit. The tall forest towers; Its cloudy foliage lowers Ahead, shelf above shelf; Its silence I hear and obey That I may lose my way And myself. Turn the lights out; stop reading the poem, the landscape, and Edward. The poem did not aid a form of dwelling, nor did I feel at one with the land, in the slightest. It was discomforting, dislocating and distorting, depressing, it left me miserable, in a grey and unpleasant land. Unsurprisingly, it is one of the last poems ever written by Edward. Knowing that he was nearing the end, the landscape becomes gloomier than ever; a vessel on to which he can project his darkest thoughts and feelings. In so doing conditions and sensations, which are indescribable, and difficult to get down on paper, can be immortalised without a latent racism - his testimony, Lights Out, for people who have fought at war, is timeless. There is no last swipe at the Kaiser, it does not yearn, or mourn for England, hills, greenery; it is simply the moment before the inevitable shell. Said starkly, it is death. And it echoes the Siegfried Sassoon poem How to Die. Dark clouds are smouldering into red While down the craters morning burns The dying soldier shifts his head To watch the glory that returns; He lifts his fingers toward the skies Where holy brightness breaks in flame; Radiance reflected in his eyes, And on his lips a whispered name. The morning loop in question, conceived of originally to celebrate the birthday of a poet, was only about death. R.I.P Edward.

We only walked a short distance in the afternoon. I had made myself scarce for the hour or so that they spent in the school eating. Sometimes sitting inside the car, sometimes just outside it, until the elders returned. They looked a little drained; some remained inside and did not walk with. I was surprised not to see Colin emerge. There must have been some important last minute preparations needed to be taken care of down at the church. The atmosphere was different. Maybe we were going to walk down to the pub and sign an oversized birthday card after all. Not
possible nowadays without the use of transport - when the Fellowship was still in its infancy, it was only a pound to get on the hired coach. And you would be taken on a tour of all the best poetic sites; a loop of the waterfall, the memorial stone, the manor farm, and the pub with no name, with a relevant poem read beside each. All in a morning too; speeding down the narrow straight roads and winding up the deep sunken lanes in comfort. You would then sit for a while at the pub with no name, and perhaps drink from the gleaming taps of old peculiar, stacked barrels of no name bitter, or the seasonal jugs of spicy mulled wine at one forty a go, before signing the huge card with a few other long haired young blokes and lasses in woolly jumpers.

Where did all the young people who liked poetry go? I milled about at the back and watched the aging gaggle weave their way uphill like ants, in perfectly straight lines back and forth. The land rolled off down to the left, stopped by a hedgerow. To the right a track, only visible due to the constant scuffing of rubber, led to a farm. I circled for a while, until it was my turn to ascend the stairlift. In the heavens we heard Now I know that Spring will come again, Perhaps to-morrow: however late I've patience After this night following on such a day. I hoped so. Winter was dragging. Skinny branches without leaf left the landscape naked, and nothing covered the shame of empty crisp packets and plastic bottles. I would have had to go in pursuit of spring sooner if winter had persisted any longer, having, like pretty much everybody else, mild seasonal affective disorder. Back down the hill to the church after the hopeful Sermon on the Mount. By the time I reached the church for tea and cakes, rows of shoes had been placed neatly outside and inside the porch. They created a little barrier. It was enough to make me turn back. Attending a memorial service was a step too far with a notepad. Most other members turned back too, feeling themselves too new to the family. They left sharply to avoid any awkward questions, a quick wave sufficed. Mass exodus completed, I stared at the empty shoes for a little too long. And they claimed a greater poignancy than they were ever meant to. No more walking with no more bodies to fill their leather uppers. The Fellowship is dwindling. The church is falling silent. I scurried off. R.I.P Edward.
On the highway to the sun clouds topped the windscreens. They showed no sign of being blown apart and over casting some other more deserving road - the M25 came to mind. Instead on the A303 with a prophetic insistence they squatted, over the roof of the car, attempting to alter the mood of the road; leaving a distinct waft of authority, an air of superiority and power, even above the ancient route east west, reducing it seemingly to just a road. It was the first time though I had headed down this way towards the beaches of Devon and Cornwall. And it was a totally different experience to driving in the other direction, with a beautiful companion, C, beside. The road somehow clawed out images of family holidays, sandcastles, swimming trunks, ice-cream cones, and striped windbreakers from the recesses, despite having never driven it before. And I projected forward a bit further down the comforting highway, to Ilfracombe, and back to childhood. It certainly felt like a holiday road, transporting the psyche to the beach long before the body arrives and the toes touch the sand. Different roads have different personalities, from route 66 to the A6. The A303 is as ingrained in the English landscape as Stonehenge, by which it carves. It is a symbol of a bygone age before mass foreign travel, the modern age when planners dreamt it could become a superhighway, the road down which Londoners escaped the city in search of the seaside. The most important three digit road in Britain. And in comparison to the hated A34, up which I had to drive in order to reach the A303 from Steep, it is reasonably well loved by the infrequent user - if used regularly though the endless bottlenecks could become a pain and may change the romantic perception of the road I have. The major junction with the north south A34 and the rerouted A30 is strangely shaped to avoid the pub, the Bullington Cross Inn, which gives the junction its name. It was unlikely that the full ninety-two mile length of the A303 could be done in one, after the birthday wake-walk just endured, so I factored in a stop beyond the white lines and hard shoulder. There was only one establishment in which it would be fitting to stop along this stretch of highway: Little Chef. Failing to see one, a crappy triangle sandwich would do. The car was quickly up to speed, as I weaved it back and forth across the two relatively quiet lanes, knitting myself to the faded light grey tarmac, passing caravan after caravan coming the other way; over the River Test, full of trout, through the Harewood Forest, and on to the eastern outskirts of Andover. Still two lanes, I shot past the airfield and motor racing circuit at Thruxton. Black and white images of
motorcycles and riders circling minded, before lines of aircraft headed for Normandy landed upon my daydream. The bikes and planes were followed in no time by the Avon, one of the rivers Edward criss-crossed In Pursuit of Spring, beside which a circle of twenty-five blue stones called Bluestonehenge stood; shortly after this the road narrowed, for reasons that became obvious around the next bend and I slowed the car to lorry pace, while to the right rolled the southern edge of Salisbury Plain. It is an epic sight, when the road bumps into the Neolithic traveller over the crest of the curve, arching a hill; when Stonehenge becomes visible through the little frame of vision I chugged along in. I tried desperately not to think of C, when framed were black stones on a perfect dome bathed in an eerie glow, ambit traced only by the sky, with a purple hue to it in the late winter sunset. Any nearer and the effect would have been lost; with stones turning crisp, any blurring evaporating, and the magic dispelling. For a fleeting moment on a clear March evening the road became the optimum line of sight to the stone circle. Viewing it as the Neolithic traveller would, as they cleared the rise in the landscape. The vista would have astounded the early humans who sought it, stopping them in their tracks. The scene is gone in a flash in a car. It has dwelt in the memory though. A personal image of the stones, yet much the same as the imaginings of so many other a303 drivers, framed by a dashboard, steering wheel, roof, windscreen pillars, and reinforced glass through which, looming in the distance, is an alien object, an unaccustomed to, formation of matter. Despite the wonder in photographic distancing that the car frame allows, it is clear this swathe of countryside should be pedestrianised so people can walk the same route to the stone circle as many a Neolithic traveller. A tunnel has been suggested. Having an arterial route passing so close to the stones is nothing new though. A few miles down the a303 is possibly the first crossroads in history. The section of road along which I coasted followed the ancient Harroway to a point where it met the Ridgeway, which here goes north and south, and is nowadays referred to as the a350. Both roads are among the oldest in Britain, scribed mainly atop the chalk spine of England. The Harroway forms the western part of the Old Way, an ancient trackway dating from the Neolithic period, which can be traced from Rochester and the Channel ports in the Straits of Dover along the North Downs and through Guildford, Farnham, Andover and Basingstoke to Salisbury Plain and Stonehenge, and on to Seaton on the Devon coast. Harroway could mean road the shrine, to
Stonehenge. While the Ridgeway is a ridgeway or ancient trackway that extends from Wiltshire along the chalk ridge of the Berkshire Downs to the River Thames at the Goring Gap, part of the Icknield Way which ran, not always on the ridge, from Salisbury Plain to East Anglia. Like the Harroway the Ridgeway led to a sacred monument; the megalithic stone circle of Avebury. It would in the past have carried on, connected to the Dorset coast as well, providing a reliable trading route. The high dry ground made travel easy and provided a measure of protection by giving traders a commanding view, warning against potential attacks. Both roads would have originally been routes animals cleared when migrating, meaning they could date back even further than the Neolithic traveller. Incidentally both routes were taken by Edward when writing books that were part topographic survey, part transcendental travelogue. He tramped the Harroway and beyond on foot when researching The Icknield Way and followed the Ridgeway in part by bicycle, when In Pursuit of Spring. They are high and most ancient roads. The intersection was as the meeting of two motorways is today. Not that you could tell that when crossing it by car. I drove slowly down the single lane bottleneck through the village of Chicklade looking out for a sign. There was a sharp turn to the right, but no left turn. The sign said in reflective font a350. Though in the car there was no change to the highway, it ran smooth and straight, not deviating in the slightest from its goal of delivering people beachwards. No rise or fall, as the a350 tunnels underneath the a303. No marker in the landscape, no longer a crossroads, as these ancient highways are lost for a small stretch underneath roads with delusions of grandeur. The a303, a trunk road, had delusions of becoming a super highway. In comparison with the highways of the past both pale in insignificance. The Icknield Way and the Harroway are the only super highways in the south - the Icknield Way being the chief surviving ancient road connecting East Anglia to the whole eastern half of the regions north of the Thames, with the west and the western half of the south of England. It does for the people of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridge, Bedford, Hertford, Buckingham, and Oxford, what the Harroway does for people of Kent, Surrey, Sussex, and East Hampshire. Although there was no sign to mark the old Harroway Icknield Way crossing there was a far greater symbol of its importance as a junction, a hallowed service stop, a Little Chef, situated a few hundred yards beyond the flyover - handy for the peckish Neolithic traveller, able to tuck into an all day breakfast. The
sign shone away still. The comforting fat white dough like cartoon human in a huge hat against a solid red background; a beacon beckoning. I pulled over on to the slip road and parked next to the one other car in the car park. I had got used to eating alone, since moving south. And headed straight for the red and white striped awning above the door. Vulgar lighting, enough to attract a thousand flies, twee plastic picnic furniture on a red carpet, red curtains tied back, a sort of pine bar running the length of the place, and a lad in his late teens, greeted me inside the single storey bungalowesque building - modernity gone wrong. At least this one had managed to stay open though and serve the nomadic. It felt like a bad impersonation of an American diner; so bad it is almost good, like a Robin Reliant, or a Pot Noodle. I was shown to my seat - a window booth, with a lovely view back down the 303 towards the ancient crossing. Looking around the room, slightly grubby, a bit dirty, and rough round the edges; I was put in mind of an independent establishment rather than a large chain store. The menu added to that feeling, with its simple, hearty grub. I ordered all day breakfast and a cup of tea and stared out at the odd car still on the road late into a Sunday evening. I began thinking that these sort of places are a dying institution. It is less necessary to stop now on a journey west. The beach is nearer to the city, as cars have become quicker and more reliable, and triangle sandwiches omnipresent beside the petrol pump. It is sad because there is something so quintessentially British about a crummy little, Little Chef. The Heinz tomato sauce, sitting in the centre of the table before me, of restaurants - a symbol of hope in an otherwise cruel fast food world. If Little Chef can keep going then anything can. A corner shop, a butchers, a bakers, a candlestick makers. For it has been dated for decades, out of touch with the marketing maestros. It has remained stubbornly exactly the same. You will not see any advertisements with the latest pop squirted into your ears via a couple of overly fried eggs, or any claims that the food is in anyway healthy. There is no crisp clean white décor, or pandering to the new affluent motorway business person. Negligence from the top has meant it has retained a certain charm that other service stations have not. The bland, lifeless, soulless, dead, motorway ones for instance, with their obsession with cleanliness above all else. It is not like it even took very long for the food to come out. As soon as I had finished my reverie - this place in its hey-day, full up to the rafters, the 303 a bustling superhighway, modernity in full swing - a plate was plonked before me. I devoured the hot
greasy slop in seconds; it slipped down my gullet with no crunching necessary, and was on my way. Fully refreshed and ready to attack the 303, after a romantic stop-over in a Little Chef - no longer modern, as twee as a cottage, a tea-towel, a bed and breakfast, Betjeman. I will be sad when the last one shuts. On the road again, I toyed with the idea of getting off the 303 and driving south via the Mayor of Casterbridge, to the coast and The Black Tower, and looping back round past On Chesil Beach meeting The French Lieutenant’s Woman, and Persuasion and coming in to Exeter along the coast. But I had gained a re-found love of the 303 after a quick pit stop - no longer was it a meaningless strip of tarmac to me, in contrast to most other busy roads it felt quite homely after only two uses. Not sure why it had that affect. The places it delivers you to are well known to me for sure, but what of its flesh and bones I drive on; perhaps it is the fact that the 303 crosses but does not cross out by running the whole length of earlier highways that makes it a comforting, solid, direct, honest road to drive. It retains for itself some of their residual mystical charm. Each age has its own kind of road; gradually old roads are transformed or combined to form a new road. It is no surprise that the 303 follows the routes of so many pre-existing ways. Invaders mostly have to take what roads they find, upgrading them where possible. That is unless they have the forethought, and resource to make their own, as happened on the section of the 303 where it follows the Roman road, the Fosse Way. Just after the Roman town of Illchester where there was a fort, the road is perfectly straight for a few miles, before the road begins to wind around the contours of the Blackdown Hills to reach its conclusion. For most of its length the 303 is straightish though, so it is not a noticeable change to Roman road, like a train clunking on to a different track. And it is only a very small section of the entire road, which links Exeter to Lincoln, so it is travelled by car in moments. Like the ancient ways before them, the Roman roads stretched across the country; it joined Ackeman Street and Ermin Way at Cirencester, crossed Watling Street at High Cross south of Leicester, and joined Ermine Street at Lincoln. Over a distance of one hundred and eighty two miles, it is never more than six miles from a straight line. Differing greatly from the Neolithic roads, deviating as the landscape did, following the elevated seams of chalk. Paying homage to both methods of road building in its final stages - perfectly straight one minute cutting through and over the hills at their apex if need be, and increasingly winding the next as it
flows beneath and around the hills at their base or side. The 303 in turn, reveals none of what it is supposed to be. It seems like it gives up in the last few miles, sick of pretending to be a superhighway, or a highway to the sun, it narrows, straddles, follows, and straightens, as it is told to by the landscape and a previous road, until it throws the towel in altogether at the a30 junction, becoming the a30. Pagan festivals, wicker people, sunshine worship. And of course Stonehenge. By which people pass on their way to Glastonbury. All forgotten. The 303 had already ceased to be ages before this point in my journey though - the hippy road, the fun road, the one you ferry along in groups to fish rivers, to walk in open countryside, to sit on a beach, to watch music at a festival, gone with the monotony of driving in the dark. It is a sad end for a road with so much promise. Kula Shaker sang *You can find yourself home on the 303*. I could not. The road was cut across by another, well before my claustrophobic, utilitarian four walls in Exeter. Thinking back though to the early part of the journey, completed in the dazzling low late winter sun, some of the other things they mention in the song now sort of make sense to me. *I'm just I'm just I'm just a man stuck pushing some wheel Moving on and down the road to the 303 In the land of summer sun we have just begun Riding out with my friends in a Mercedes Benz You can find you a home on the 303 Let yourself go on the 303, on the 303 etc. Hard times, well all I know is that... Dark times? Gotta let it go because I got my friends and I love my friends, I got my friends right to the end round the bend, all together now I've got to, got to, get to some place I've not seen Headless guru in the night show me what you mean! In the land of summer sun we have just begun Perfect picture card scene, changing all that has been You can find your way home on the 303 You can let somebody know on the 303, on the 303 etc. Hard times, well all I know is that... Dark times? Gotta let it go because I got my stash And I love my hash, I got my stash Think I'll grow myself a big ol' hairy moustache.
It started with an urge to write something about a literary society, three years earlier. An urge to walk in a strange way. Differently to what I was used. And document. Walk away from an industrial northern town to its nationwide opposite; an affluent rural southern village. Experience what poets meant by the sublime. Placing Edward Thomas at the centre of the journey: as a provocation. I have to admit: I have developed an unhealthy obsession with Edward Thomas, as he aided and inspired, becoming both the subject and the object of this work and at the same time neither. The ripples had to stop somewhere though. I had to give up the ghost sometime. It is not normal to be this fixated upon a poet. Where do I end and Edward begins? I know I am several already, but still. This had to be my last birthday loop, or I would never get myself out. Find myself again or lose myself forever. I was happy for it to finish, all this, everything. I was already very different to when I began. Beyond this walk I would cycle, admittedly along a route devised by Edward, away from these few years for good. But for now, I would continue the usual routine on arrival. Remembering C. Remembering Edward. Past loops. Feedback loops. Feeding back into my assembled psyche. Damaged since this all began. Kill the engine. Shoe-up, lace-up, coat-up. Abuse the notebook, force information into it. Wait by the posh school. Imagine C, in her grey coat. And listen out for the welcoming words. Become the Fellowship; the collective consciousness. Doing anything otherwise was useless and futile. It had to be gone through one last time. The walk would on this occasion commemorate the centenary of the publication of* Light and Twilight*, *The Isle of Wight*, *Maurice Maeterlinck* and *The Tenth Muse* but not for some reason *Celtic Stories*. The 2012 birthday walk could commemorate *Algernon Charles Swinburne*, *George Borrow: the Man and his Books*, *Lafcadio Hearn*, and *Norse Tales*. The one after that *The Icknield Way*, *The Country*, and *The Happy Go Lucky Morgans*. And so on until the Fellowship ran out of centenaries in a few years time. His death may take preference to commemorate the centenary of in 2017. The first reading to occur was a segment chosen from *The Isle of Wight*; a place which I had only ever been to once, with C. I went off on my own, and separated myself from the group, and its collective consciousness immediately. I was carted off to the island on hearing its name and
only partly returned - after remembering a photograph taken in front of a pub, and a reverie of the ferry ride from Southampton to Cowes, involving drink, laughter, and sick - post reading. Tennyson was mentioned by those in the know. The island was his home. It is a maquette of the mainland, sort of, with various different landforms. The Needles were recalled, giant chalk stacks, putting in mind the chalk down land, feet beneath the tarmac. The customary photograph was taken. I stood out alone on this occasion at the back of shot, without a companion of similar age. And remained there until all set out for the memorial stone, following the stragglers through the school gate, towards the crossroads, repeating the same route as previously up to the stone. An exercise in repetition. Repeating and repeating loops, ceaselessly year on year. Despite this the loops always circle Edward and Steep differently. Revealing something new each time. Connections are never curtailed but encouraged. Sought out and elucidated. Edward is summoned on a birthday walk only as part of a network of others. This is fitting, as it is how Edward wrote, moving books in and out of his topographical work in a variety of surprising ways. It is also how he understood his own subjectivity, having created doppelgangers in poetry and prose. He was several by his own admission, mildly schizophrenic, and not averse to creating heightened versions of himself. A doppelganger that walks the countryside and writes, called The Other, like Edward in general, recurs and haunts. Satirical in nature, it pokes fun at the pursuit of land writing, critiquing as it goes. It arrives everywhere before the caricatured Edward Thomas bumbling along behind, chasing - acting as a nod to all the great poets who came before him, and all the other people who make up who he is, more importantly though, it is an acknowledgement of the tensions at play in writing creative non-fiction, or poetry, illustrating perfectly the thorny issue of subjectivity and supposed literary artifice. The poem, The Other, is a reconciling process, a reconciling of the subject; a process which is always doomed to failure. I travelled fast, in hopes I should Outrun that other. What to do When caught, I planned not. I pursued To prove the likeness, and, if true, To watch until myself I knew... By the inn door: ere I alight I wait and hear the starlings wheeze And nibble like ducks: I wait his flight. He goes: I follow: no release Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease. In In Pursuit of Spring Edward speaks of his anxieties further when representing what he witnesses walking, through The Other Man, showing a self-awareness not always attributed to a poet of
his ilk. There is though something else at play here, a distinct separation of the material world and the linguistic text - a binary which cuts through all of these excursions. The excursions speak, as positive exercises, to the anxieties voiced by previous environmental authors, muddying the waters between the material and the linguistic; reaching beyond authenticity for more intimate, imaginative and creative ways of knowing the world. Why is a poem not a thing? The stragglers turned right at the Aspens still talking away to each other, swishing their leaves in the regular gusts of wind. I followed. The poem Edward witnessed and then wrote still there. The aspens recite it to this day - a poem in itself.

We stopped at the house of Muirhead Bone, at the base of the wooded escarpment. The solitary pine stood dead ahead, behind it the shoulder. Letters from Edward to Eleanor Farjeon were read out in the front garden, referring to the Bone family. The former house of the war artist sat in the shadow of the chalk ridge. On top of which was the memorial stone, only just visible. Apple trees spotted the garden; an orchard. A similar age to Edward at the outbreak of war, Muirhead did not have to fight. He arrived in France though during the Battle of the Somme and began to draw what he witnessed, serving with the Allied Forces on the Western Front and also with the Royal Navy for a time, returning to England in October of that year with one hundred and fifty drawings. In 1917 Muirhead went back to France, to the ruined towns and villages, again to draw what he witnessed. The drawing A Church in the Citadel at Arras, was sketched a matter of weeks before Edward died there. After the war, Muirhead travelled to America. Something Robert Frost had always encouraged Edward to do. Indeed prior to the war Edward considered going but in the end chose to fight and ultimately die. Sir Muirhead Bone died in 1953 in Oxford. He has a memorial stone in St Paul’s Cathedral. Some squinted upwards, to a slither of lighter green, flanked by beech. In the centre of which sat the memorial stone all had come to visit. Before leaving the house in Steep and walking uphill, we read both versions of A Tale, and a poem we had not read before, The Wasp Trap. It goes. This moonlight makes The lovely lovelier Than ever before lakes And meadows were. And yet they are not, Though this their hour is, more Lovely than things that were not Lovely before. Nothing on earth, And in the heavens no star, For pure brightness is worth More than that jar, For wasps meant, now A star
- long may it swing. From the dead apple-bough, So glistening. Under the apple boughs we dwelt listening. Not the trees about which the poem was written but similar. Something surprising happened. It was brought on by the poetry. What we had sought throughout: a moment of being there, in the moment. Not dislocated, displaced, or distant; wound up in mnemonic reels. For, for a few fleeting seconds, there were the trees in themselves, nothing else. I was a tree amongst trees. Words flowed into the ears without need for comprehension. They were just sounds the trees made. It was a Tawny-Grammar; the song of the earth. Looking back now though, I am not sure it came to pass. Something happened but I am not sure that. I just stared at a tree, harder and for longer than I normally would, in all likelihood. So much so, that I could not remember what I had been thinking about during the poem. Silly really to explain that moment away so romantically; all I did was stare the bark off a tree. It was nice to think that it could happen though; something as magical and otherworldly. The two versions of A Tale passed without incident. I was interested in hearing both back to back. All it demonstrated though was the editing process. Both versions are very similar. A different word here and there, tell the same tale. It is not a chance to look into the mind of a poet, to view his craft, or the bones that lay underneath the finished skin. The delivery of the poems makes a huge difference. The best read poems pull you in. The Wasp Trap was read by one of the actors. A Tale was not. The words react differently when I hear them, as to when I read them, as to when I hear them performed well. We continued to walk in a crocodile once more; this time directly uphill.

It was from Light and Twilight, the next reading. We were congregated beside the memorial stone. Almost at the plateau of the chalk ridge: although not quite. Most faced away and out towards the English Channel far off and Buriton in the middle distance, where a W.H. Hudson literary walk can be looped. A few stared hard at the hard sarsen rock. It mimicked the majority and gazed back from on high with its plaque shining outwards: a beacon to prompt the memory, drawing people up on to the rocks. Once the reading began everyone crowded around to listen in. Some still faced out to sea. Most did though now pay attention. They stared into the face of the bearded actor - adept nowadays at playing Edward after years of practice. The actor
entertained all with the end to *The End of the Day*; a chapter from *Light and Twilight*. It went. *They waited on her, some wistful, some imperious, but all drawn after her whithersoever she went, all praising her for her sweet lips, her long brown hair and its gloom and hidden smouldering fires, her eyes and her eyelids that were as the violet opened flower and the white closed bud, her breath sweet as the earth’s, her height, her whiteness, her swift limbs, and her rippling arms and wrists and hands, made for love and for all fair service; her straightness, that was as the straightness of a tulip on the best day of spring; and for her life, because it was all before her, pale and mysteriously lit, without stars yet with the promise of stars like the sky which had now dismissed all clouds but one dark bar, and was expanding around and above without a bound. Into that sky, into the gorse of the moor and a wild multitude of birds, she slipped out of my sight; and I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey.*

I imagined being sat in Piccadilly Gardens, watching people walk by. Before standing up myself and going to the next place to wait for a while. The sexualised nature of the reading was troubling me though. It was not what I expected to hear. It had some worrying slippages. What with the equation of women and nature apparent. Edward observes and writes of her as if she has a closeness to nature which he, or any other man, cannot achieve. I stood and worried that I was guilty of this also in parts. And I had become a new romantic; asserting a heterosexual sexist view of the world. I looked back out over the landscape and sighed. The actor stood imperious. He owned this stage. Gazing out over our heads he began again. And recited a poem by Humphrey Clucas written about Edward called *Pilgrimage*. It came from the book of poems; *Elected Friends: Poems for and about Edward Thomas*. Edited by Anne who had organised the readings for each of the birthday walks. The poem summed up our day, travelling up to the stone with words at hand. I read the engraving one last time and touched the stone, flattening out my palm, hoping to leave some of the pain up there; *and I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey.* Goodbye or farewell, I was not sure which. Sometimes goodbye becomes farewell sadly. And you never see the one you love again.

The sunlight shone and bounced off the glass entrance hall, heating its inside. I waited there with the artwork made by the pupils. Some decent sculptures were dotted around the place - a
kangaroo and a lamb beside myself in there. They cast shadows in odd shapes across the rustic brick floor. There was nothing much else to do other than stare at them. Nobody came over to speak to me, whilst I sat on the comfortable sofas. Some cagouled people occasionally walked through to go to the toilet. At about two in the afternoon more began streaming my way. They congregated in the same place as they had in the morning - by the bit of paper stuck to the glass, out front. I did the same, ready for one final birthday walk. In the opposite direction we walked to before; down past the church, slipping by it, through the topiary garden of an old house, and on to a sunken lane. The tamed bushes rolled down to the lane in waves, where they met wild prickly holly. Tennis courts, stables, a golf course, and other rich trinkets, adorned the route. We did not stop though and followed the a3, not leaving its bank, hearing it beyond a copse, not far off to our right. Knowing where it would lead, Steep Marsh, eventually Liss, and the forest there, beyond that Liphook and a Flora Thompson literary walk devised by Anne Mallinson, founder of the Fellowship. The Shoulder arced up behind us, back the other way, just over which is Hawkley, looped by a William Cobbett literary walk. We were padding along the same route as I walked with Doug years earlier. The Harrow Inn with its variety of ales in barrels and endearing outdoor bogs were passed by for the first time since. Its garden was packed with people swilling wine and knocking back pints. We still did not stop though. The sunken lane opened out in to an empty field of lush grass. The field gave on to the a3 now raised above. Most walked up and watched the cars go by. All heard the noise that they created. On the road that cuts between Petersfield and Steep. A line of trees squeezed everyone towards the road so we were once again directly beneath it. The narrow path led to another road, which ran underneath the busy road to London. I thought of the Harroway, and the ancient crossroads. Strangely, it was here that we stopped; underneath the noisy road, inside the short concrete tunnel. Engines now echoed loudly and we could distinguish between vehicles. There were a few sly comments and funny looks, at the choice of location, when all caught up. It soon became clear why we had walked this way though. Some of the members wanted to see the house where Alec Guinness lived, up close. It was a hundred or so metres back up the road and away from the a3. At the gates they talked of how he loved living in the area, and of his films, before moving on after a few minutes. Still nothing was read. Off road again, after walking the
wider road, we passed a sad little horse. Its mane in its eyes, its belly rounded, its head hanging over the gate. The Shetland pony made no noise whatsoever. It just looked up at us walking by. I have never seen an animal look so lonely. It appeared dejected and fed up with life. A lost soul: a kindred spirit. It was still in exactly the same position, in its tiny corner pen, when I turned back having reached the high point of the field. Over on the other side of the field were a few elegant horses prancing to and fro. People were beginning to bunch under some oaks. When I caught up, I realised what it was. The stile, the same one I stepped over two years ago. I remembered the way C climbed over it face first, her grey coat hanging down like a cape. People were not stepping over it though. They were waiting for a reading. The stile overlooked Steep Marsh and the a3 now in the distance. I was pretty sure that it had no explicit connection to Edward. Anne explained that there was a stile in the area, which Edward had written about. It could be the one we stood beside. He wrote about a stile in Light and Twilight. And called the section; The Stile. He was walking with Walter de la Mere. Someone else began without warning: Three roads meet in the midst of a little green without a house or the sign of one, and at one edge there is an oak copse with untrimmed hedges. One road goes east, another west, and the other north; southward goes a path known chiefly to lovers, and the stile which transfers them to it from the rushy turf is at a corner of the copse. The reader continued for a while. I heard only; One day I stopped by the stile at the corner to say good-bye to a friend who had walked thus far with me.

Looping back around to the church, we stopped only once more. It was down in the dark coombe, by a wooden signpost. There the bearded actor read for the last time. It was an excerpt from The Last Four Years by Eleanor Farjeon, concerning again; Light and Twilight. Eleanor had just read the book. She asked Edward shyly the next morning whether he had ever written poetry. Edward in his usual self-deprecating way replied that he couldn’t write a poem to save his life. He wrote many in the end. None saved his life though. There is something therapeutic about writing poems nevertheless. Perhaps they do save the lives of some. The act of writing down memories has helped me in a way, I think. Whether this can be classed as good poetry though is another matter. It is a little self-indulgent. I set out In Pursuit of Spring the day after
the 2011 birthday walk aiming to change this. Not finished just yet. There was a surprise ending to the 2011 birthday walk. I sat in the church, eating cake and drinking tea, when some young people stood before the pews and set up some instruments - a cello, an accordion, and an acoustic guitar. They were in their early twenties like me. The bearded man appeared and explained what was going on. The folk musicians were going to play some traditional songs familiar to Edward. Edward had sung songs with various friends. He shared shanties with Arthur Ransome. Myfanwy tells of her young self innocently singing a couple to Ransome and his first wife, causing outrage. *Sweet William* was a song Myfanwy remembers her father singing at bath time. She also recalled, *What Shall we do with The Drunken Sailor, The Garden of Love* and *Hunting the Whale*. In a letter Eleanor Farjeon asked Edward for the words of two songs, which she had heard him sing; *John Blunt* and *Mister McKinley* - a song about the assassination of an American president Edward learned from D.H. Lawrence at a gathering of friends in Sussex. It is of course likely that he would have known far more songs than there are record of in print; including music-hall ditties and barrack-room amusements. There are also sections of *This England* and *The Heart of England* where Edward lists old songs. Before the folk could begin though, the minutes from last year were read out and the annual general meeting was formally proceeded through. The sad news of the sudden death of Edward Cawston Thomas, president, was the first thing read. Had I crossed the line of shoes I would have heard the short moving speech a year earlier. Colin continued through what was said in the church that day. Study days, weekends away, and the autumn walk. Before handing over to the bearded man once more. Between songs the actor was to read out bits of writing by Edward. He introduced the folk singer, Emily Portman, who began singing the song *Borstal Boy*. She was accompanied by Rob and Lucy. All the men but one leaned back upon the settles or forward upon the tables, their hand on their tankards, watching the one who sang a ballad - a ballad known to them so well that they seemed not to listen, but simply to let the melody surge about them and provoke what thoughts it would. *Borstal Boy* was followed by *Love Apples*. And of all music the old ballads and folk songs and their airs are richest in the plain immortal symbols... their alphabet is small; their combinations are as sweet as the sunlight or the storm... They are the quintessence of many lives and passions made into a sweet cup for posterity. They are in
themselves epitomes of whole generations, of a whole countryside. Mournfully wailing, floating hither and thither, beautifully, words of old songs in the little church, hit home. In the parlour of the inn the singer stood and sang of how a girl was walking alone in the meadows of spring when she saw a ship going out to sea and heard her true love crying on board... He sang without stirring, without expression, except in so far as light and darkness from his own life emerged enmeshed among the deep notes... and that little inn, in the midst of immense night, seemed a temple of all souls. Dumfounded, staring at the scene before me, I slipped into reverie, walking with C through lush green fields, past full summer trees, down to a glistening babbling brook. I jumped in, weighed my body down, and drowned myself. I could see through the water, up at her, standing on the bank, looking for me for a few moments, before she walked away. Sometimes goodbye turns into farewell. Edward believed the old songs, some of which I heard in the nave, bridged the chasm between the material and the linguistic. Like folklore and poetry, the ballads had for Edward an enviable closeness to nature. They have an authenticity of rhyme, onomatopoeia, a language not to be betrayed. Getting at things in themselves. Becoming things in themselves. I should use as the tree and birds did a language not to be betrayed - words which still have their roots showing. I left the church a doppelganger never to return again, heading pell-mell for London up the a3. To ride through countryside, in order to describe it, the next day. I emerged from beneath the m25 - the new city boundary, the moat - before Cobham, sopping up the heat of the city. It was early evening when I arrived in a still sunny Clapham. Passing by the road on which Edward lived as a boy. I parked beside my bike, locked up outside the house, and waited in the car for a few moments. That was the end of my days with the Fellowship. The most organised literary society in the country.
Preston, May 2011
‘The history that threatens this twilight world could potentially subject space to a directly experienced time. Proletarian revolution is this critique of human geography through which individuals and communities could create places and events commensurate with the appropriation no longer just of their work, but of their entire history. The ever-changing playing field of this new world and the freely chosen variations in the rules of the game will regenerate a diversity of local scenes that are independent without being insular. And this diversity will revive the possibility of authentic journeys - journeys within an authentic life that is itself understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.’

(Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord)
Kettle: a march on parliament

‘A travelling incarceration. Immobile inside the train, seeing immobile things slip by. What is happening? Nothing is moving inside or outside the train. The unchanging traveller is pigeonholed, numbered, and regulated in the grid of the railway car, which is a perfect actualization of the rational utopia. Control and food move from pigeonhole to pigeonhole... everything has its place in the gridwork. Only a rationalized cell travels. A bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity - that is what can traverse space and make itself independent of local roots... Outside, there is another immobility, that of things, towering mountains, stretches of green field and forest, arrested villages, colonnades of buildings, black urban silhouettes against the pink evening sky, the twinkling of nocturnal lights on a sea that precedes or succeeds our histories.’

(Railway Navigation and Incarceration, Michel de Certeau)

Some horses wandered back and forth unhindered, across a farmer’s field under pylons chained. Nothing much else happened when the train stopped on the outskirts of Minehead, bar the horses being intrigued by the presence of a weed beside their lush field. Most passengers just read while the horses advanced, the chance to see them spurned, the printed word preferred to the world now visible if they turned. The train started up again, I had grown a moustache and it was early December. It was the day of the tuition fee vote, to be precise. Being a politically apathetic member of the iPod generation, I was surprised to be on a train heading towards Nick Clegg and his lying mouth. The train we were on was packed full of students not walking to parliament. Selfish consumerist non-marchers, like I once was. I felt pity for them, using uni only for a few years of hedonism and a fast track to loads of money. We sat up high in our comfy seats, banner folded away, sneering and talking quietly about politics amongst ourselves.
In particular we talked about the cuts to public services not being about a lack of money in the system but about the desire to privatise. We talked of sensible alternatives, such as increasing all fees by a little, taxing tax-dodging multi-national companies headed by obscenely rich individuals, and even under our breath, wholesale revolution. Over the hum of the early train to Paddington though, we could heed faint murmurings of discontent, at our wasted journey. Students should not have the time apparently, to protest on behalf of the workers who do not have the time. They should be studying, or doing what they had been widely portrayed to do over the past ten years: wasting time and money. Free thinking; thinking outside of the lecture notes box, is not allowed. And what was the point, was the general feeling we got from the carriage. Gideon and Dave had the liars - formerly the liberals, who I like many of the students around us, had voted for - along with the whole country, over a barrel. The four of us were not marching to parliament for purely selfish reasons though, as was often reported and purported. Tuition fees were what the coalition wanted the protest to be about. The further privatisation of education and the selling of a future, was not even the sole reason that we were marching - despite it being a very good reason to march on its own. There was a far greater, more powerful movement bubbling up, at the smashing up of Tory HQ that we wanted to be a part of - involving all classes, all workers, all unions, and indeed all people who disliked living under a polarizing, unfair, succession of governments. We were all in this together, fighting the swingeing cuts, not just us spoilt university kids. We held also on to some hope, as the train rumbled along, that the party formerly known as the liberals would listen to us once we got to parliament square. And not sell the soul of their party to the right, condemning themselves to election oblivion; in the process allowing all politicians to hang on to a shred of dignity. Well let’s hope so, as we had come a long way and left the safety of Devon, Coleridge and the Quantocks behind. Travelling quickly towards and passing through Jefferiesland, down Brunel’s old GWR. The track followed an ancient ridge for a while, cutting through the landscape, along with the m4. Edward would have tramped all over this crest of chalk, thinking of a world after the London I hurtled towards - after privatisation, after protest, after people: I like to think how easily Nature will absorb London as she absorbed the mastodon, setting her spiders to spin the winding sheet and her worms to fill in the graves, and her grass to cover it.
pitifully up, adding flowers - as an unknown hand added them to the grave of Nero. He wrote on a train from London. A quotation since used by Will Self. Travelling backwards, head in hand, in a thinkers pose, I gazed beyond the glass at the smooth seemingly unending landscape - so ordered, so plain. The train stopped again, for some unbeknown reason. Beyond the pane of the packed train, a lonely cow sat in solitude in a field. Separated from the other slack-jawed fat cattle, crowded around the gate, mindlessly grouped to wait, discussing the latest trait, hoping not to be late. Making a break for it the lonely cow stood up, came over to the train and stared in for a while at the herd in the pen, munching away, groaning. I gorped at the cow now sat back down content having a think, while the train remained delaying our slaughter. I thought of Edward writing Adlestrop his most famous poem on a train - ironic really that his most famous poem was written about train travel, when you consider the days and days spent walking and his general dislike of trains. When I looked out again a few moments later the ridge of chalk had given way to the jumbled suburbs of Reading. Beyond there the green fields we shot by were red and brown houses and grey concrete platforms of minor stations, like Adlestrop. Yes, I remember Adlestrop - The name, because one afternoon Of heat the express-train drew up there Unwontedly. It was late June. The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat. No one left and no one came On the bare platform. What I saw Was Adlestrop - only the name And willows, willow-herb, and grass, And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry, No whit less still and lonely fair Than the high cloudlets in the sky. And for that minute a blackbird sang Close by, and round him, mistier, Farther and farther, all the birds Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. My own imaginary of England, was swamped by thoughts of privatisation, protest, and people - the immediate events that were about to transpire when we stepped from the relative comfort of the train. I was about to walk on parliament for a cause with thousands of others; all attempting to stop the commercialisation of learning and the selling of knowledge only to those who feel they can afford. I chose not to take a back seat as usual and watch as people, courses, universities, whole areas, were priced out of the market. Instead I unfurled my banner and marched to save historic institutions and faculties from closure, to give poor kids from poor towns the chance to read a degree somewhere, if they so wished, to shout education in itself is a good thing, market forces will only discourage the arts, and to frankly stick my two fingers up to this policy. The
spirit of the Fellowship and their preservationist walking ideas have rubbed off on me over the years, as well as 68. The Fellowship preserve by walking; we were aiming to save age old institutions, by doing the same.

We joined the back of the moving crowd at Russell Square. Very near a church hall where an Edward Thomas study day was once held. On the study day I drank tea and ate cakes, whilst we spoke of the cafes frequented by writers and poets. A lot of them were around and about the bit of the city that we marched through on the day of the vote; when I chanted, held a banner, and strode past those same bourgeois cafes. Different days, different walks. The march was a pretty cheery affair. We took in the sights, Trafalgar Square and a vast line of unbothered police, Horse Guards Parade and a single curved line of unaffected police; we even stopped to take photos and talked at points. The amount of people and the noise was awe inspiring down the cavernous echoing streets. We were sure they would hear us in parliament. Waves of cheering would crash towards us as walls of sound and chants would break out intermittently about us. They say cut that, we say fight back! Education is a right, not a privilege! Huge banners surrounded us and floated and rippled in the wind, dwarfing ours. No one was without some sort of message to send to the politicians. Big Ben was in the distance now - forward and onward to parliament square. Bag the banner for now. The crowd became tighter and louder as the clock loomed above. We squeezed in just about. To our right the Houses of Parliament revealed themselves above a sea of heads. We walked towards them, around the crush, and on to a grassy knoll. From which I could have taken out whomever I pleased. Before us was the whole landscape. A column of protesters, all converged on the left hand side of the square - a bottle neck they had been forced in to. A line of riot police, shields and batons, backed up with a line of horses flanked them on the right, along with metal fencing. A line of buildings, the treasury etc, flanked them on the left. And a line of riot vans stopped them dead ahead in the middle distance, before the river. While still more bodies were trying to squeeze in. The huge numbers of people had nowhere to go. More and more were coming down the run off route we had taken. Scuffles were breaking out between the riot police and the swelling backlog. I say scuffles. Batons were hitting unarmed heads forced forward by sheer weight of numbers. After about ten
minutes or so the crowd began to get restless in the face of this needless aggravation and caging in by the riot police. Protesters expecting a ruck had come prepared. Thick padded book shaped banners were used as shields and pushed up against the thin line of riot police. One of them had *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida painted on it. And the run off area we were stood in watching the rough and tumble was now inundated with a sea of people. With a rush and a push from behind, we fell forward on to the street and in to parliament square. We were now unwittingly boxing the line of riot police and horses in who had stupidly stood there bashing away unaware. Not good. Thousands of people were now surrounding a group of about twenty horses. We were in very close proximity to hooves and we had no idea what would happen next. And then we heard it, the clattering of hooves and the dashing of terrified squealing bodies in all directions. I held on to one of the girls who had come with to stop her being swept away. Adrenaline pumped through me, followed by fear, as a horse crashed within feet of me - its rider struggling to keep it under control. It looked like it was going to rear up at me. The front hooves were slamming in to the floor one after the other rapidly, like a pair of pneumatic limbs. I could go no further. A cast iron spiked railing was at my back. I stood in front of a girl and held up my hands, expecting my feet to be crushed - bone splintering under the weight of the incredible specimen. But the horse just continued to slam its feet in to the ground a few feet away. And the helmeted police rider continued to lean back as far as they possibly could, tugging at the reins trying to wrestle back control. I moved along with my back to the railing. The horse followed, still threatening to shatter my extremities. Other humans were tripping over each other to get away. It was a surreal moment. Everything slowed. Sound and movement continued around about but I did not see or hear it. My mind emptied and concentrated on one thing only: The horse and not getting crushed. I thought for a moment I may actually have to fight a man on a horse. They had squared up, leaving me with no retreat. The outcome would most likely be death though and I would be portrayed as a trouble maker. So I continued to slide along with my back to the railing trying not to alarm the wild beast. Its eyes covered; lifeless, heartless, abused. Robocop atop it was the same. I would need rebuilding after this like them. Metal rods fitted to my walkers and lifters. The horse, rider and I carved a tunnel through terrified protesters, and eventually reached a clearing. It went off down a street perpendicular to the one we marched
down originally. All the horse rider hybrids had done the same. Rumours of a trampling were filtering through to my shaking body. Eyes dilated, muscles tensed, fists clenched.

The police and the horses had retreated. We were left to chant amongst ourselves under a gnarly old tree. And face the houses of parliament and a ring of riot vans and riot police. The crowd visibly calmed. Big Ben crept towards three and vote time. Someone climbed a pole and did some aerial dancing. And the metal fences were removed and we wandered the square. It had the feeling of a festival. We contemplated getting some food. But we wanted to see how this would unfold. Instead, deciding to stand just away from the riot police, beside the gate of the church. We were standing about chatting as a line of riot police followed by a line of horses came up from behind, from the road down which they had just left. The riotous protesters at the front, facing parliament, got wind of this turned and charged towards them. We charged too. What was going to happen? Was I about to run under a horse? Have a couple of metallic hooves forced though my spine? The crowd stopped luckily, in the process stopping me in my tracks. Whose streets? Our streets. Whose streets? Our streets. Whose streets? Our streets. I shouted this as loud as I could and threw my fist forward as I said it - caught up in the general psyche of the crowd at that moment. A flare was thrown. I cheered heartily as it hit a shield. Fences were passed over the top of the crowd in an organised fashion and placed between the horses and us. And other missiles, anything people could get their hands on were thrown towards the shields - none hitting flesh or bone. The crowd edged forward again. It figured it was safe doing so as the horses were backing off. Little did it know that the horses and their crafty riders were simply about to charge at the front row of defenceless bodies. All hell broke loose. People scrambled back in the other direction, falling over each other again, to the relative safety of the raised square and its monuments. I saw a news camera in the middle of the action, reporting the unfolding events; the presenter talking in to it, saying that the protesters were unhappy about the police handling of the situation. A gross understatement, if ever I heard one. We were livid. The incompetent decision makers of the force had stoked initially and then stoked the dying embers for one last flame up. I was not too keen on the individual members on the ground either after seeing the way they had almost enjoyed the confrontation, not seen since the days of firms and
football hooliganism. They lacked a good old tear up down the east end in their lives. A mass brawl to get their teeth into; where they could inflict pain with a mechanised emotionless cool to their hearts content, against a load of tooled up wide boys. We were just frightened, defenceless, apathetic youth remember though, who had been given no option but to engage and become angered.

But it was not to end there. For there was one last trick the police had in store. Just to rile the crowd up some more. Darkness had descended and the vote was taking place. The wind was whipping across the square too and the festival atmosphere from earlier had been blown away. It now felt more like a war zone. Helicopters whirred above and riot vans sealed the perimeter. We looped the site to find a way out. We were exhausted and just wanted to leave. I had not eaten since breakfast or been to the toilet. Police stared impassively at us behind shields, as hundreds of us implored them just to let us go home. No reaction. No sympathy. We were not human. We were only criminals. But I thought students were the future? Anyway, it was useless. They were not going to listen to the whimpering girls. We are the kettled generation. Once apathetic, now just ignored. One last loop was taken to settle on a waiting point. There were rumours going round that they were letting some protesters out along Whitehall. When we got there it turned out only reporters and politicians were being allowed through. This was as good a place as any to wait though, so we did. As more and more protesters got wind of the rumour though, the crowd around us began to swell. Until we were being crushed by our own against a line of shouty riot police and railings. We were squeezed to boiling point. Anger seeped over as we shouted at the shields to let us through. It was no use though they stood fast. When the crowd realised this they took matters into their own hands and gave the thin blue line no choice. We pushed them back slightly and now had the upper hand. It was a choice between letting us out peacefully or hitting out indiscriminately. Luckily they had the sense to let people out down the pavement, slowly. Then they stopped this out flow. And the pushing and shoving started up once again. Not protesters causing trouble, simply people wanting to disperse to their homes. The most dangerous part of the whole day was now about to unfold - the bit where we cheated death. We were face to face with the line of helmets and behind them was Whitehall. All of a
sudden we were jolted forward by an immense pressure. Terrified everybody at the front screamed for it to stop. Before us was a pit, dug out for the relaying of pipes. So that is why the police chose this street! A couple of feet from falling into it and inevitably being crushed by the weight of the crowd, word filtered back of the impending carnage and somehow the mass of bodies stopped itself. Hundreds could have been crushed. Catastrophe averted, just. We breathed a sigh of relief. The riot police looked as relieved as the rest of us, as they were going in there too - they quickly ushered people down the pavement once more, guarding the hole, no longer stoic.

The trench continued up Whitehall and two by two we squeezed down what was left of it. Where the road was not ripped up a line of plain clothed police were ushering people into a crowd. Everyone explained how they just wanted to leave. We were dragged towards the mob though and pushed into it. The girls were manhandled and sworn at. It was possible to squeeze around the crowd who had been told to assemble outside the treasury. So we did. Yes! The road ahead was clear. Pleased we spoke of food and a toilet. And it was at this point that I realised I had lost my phone in the skirmishes. At least I wasn’t dead though was the philosophical response of my comrades. The phone could be replaced. Who cares we were out of the kettle! We could get a pint somewhere before getting the train back. The street ahead was so clear. Eerily clear in fact. In the distance through the darkness, we could just about make out a line of shiny figures and beyond that a line of taller shiny figures - helicopter search beam reflecting off their heads. What were they doing? Just as we got within ten yards of them to ask for directions of how to get out, they charged at us. I twisted severely and legged it back in the direction I came. The other three did the same, until the line of rampaging stampeding equine human beings suddenly stopped. Oh, it was all a game they were playing - a power struggle that we were unwittingly caught up in the middle of. The cavalry retreated and prepared for another charge. And some young girls walked up to the slowly moving tide of infantry now spread across the road and begged to leave with tears rolling down their faces. One in particular was getting close to the line and pleading with them. An officer broke rank, extended his arm upwards with force and hit the girl square in the in the face with his shield. She was toppled like
a rag doll and thrown over her friend who had sat down in the hope they would stop advancing. Face bloodied. Arms and back bruised. Skull bashed against concrete. She gingerly got back to her feet. We edged back slowly with her, shouting at them for their callous actions. Nothing, just that blank expressionless face again, or an occasional sneer and a warning that we will be next. Unexpectedly, the riot police parted speedily and perfectly synchronised, allowing the horses through to trample and to terrify again. A woman clutching a baby had to dive into the open door of a building, opened seconds earlier by a security guard, only for her, to avoid being pummelled. The rest of us were left to be hit, pushed, and kicked backwards, as the riot police infantry division entered the fray once more. We limped away battered and bruised; a small group of defenceless people who simply wanted to leave. The trouble makers were outside the Treasury. These officers of the law knew that. It will all be covered up though, even had it resulted in death. We gave up hope of ever leaving the kettle and ever getting back to the safety of the town. And sat despondently on the cold hard road, with the rioters on one side of us and the riot police on the other, considering whether to sleep and piss there or not. I did a recce of the immediate area. I was just imagining seeing images of me pissing against a building, in the morning newspaper, with a caption of outrage, when I saw to my left a line of plain clothed officers. They were defying the mindless thuggery of a proportion of the riot police and letting protesters calmly and quietly out onto Embankment. I ran back over to the others. In no time we were leaving through a gate, as we left we thanked the smiling faces for their good deed. The river and freedom beckoned. I would have swum across it if it was yet another kettle that we had unwittingly entered. On Embankment there was a rally taking place - some NUS politician type, talking about lighting candles, oblivious to the suffering of peaceful protesters just behind the stage. We thought about watching it but we were desperate to get away from this horrible place. Just beyond Embankment station, a feeling of relief swept over us. Real people were going about their daily business. Hello suited, bespectacled, briefcase carrying gentleman, quaffing champagne, it is so good to see you. We entered the bar the gentleman sat in and downed a pint. There was a television in the corner. It had the vote on the left hand side of it and the ugly scenes we were only just witness to on the right. People asked us questions about the day and we were only too happy to reveal the extent of the violence. Their eyes wanted more.
They had a lust for this sort of stuff. So we told them about the huge trench down Embankment in which hundreds could have been crushed, the girl being thrown to the floor by the shield of an officer, the baby almost being crushed by stampeding horses, the whole damn lot, the whole bloody mess. And they loved it; they were hanging on our every word, with a mixture of shock and awe painted on their ugly mugs. The count was back. We had lost. But at what cost: Clegg had promised some favours down the line that turn out to be lies too, and our whole democracy turns out to be a fallacy, as thousands protest peacefully but are kettled. Maybe I should just go back to being apathetic. That is what the brutal police tactics are aimed to do though isn’t it; to put people like me off protesting, put me off having a voice. They may just have got it horribly wrong this time though. If we were not angry before the day of the vote, we certainly are now - a whole generation seems to waking up and becoming politicised. About time some would say.

In the newspaper the next day none of the events written up in this account were ever mentioned; I read about a prince and his bird taking a drive through a load of protesters, attempting to mow them down - some sort of royal game apparently. A pirate related to a member of a psychedelic band, swinging from a flag on acid, thinking he was still on a boat. And, oh yeah, a police officer pulling a man from a wheelchair and dragging him across the street whilst the rest of the gaggle of police officers watched on - presumably because the protester had glued his wheels up, sick of having a form of propulsion to get about.
Preston, January 2011
In Pursuit of Spring

A Recycling

‘Maybe I don’t like people as much as the rest of the world seems to. Seems like the human race is in love with itself. What kind of ego do you have to have to think that you were created in God’s image? I mean, to invent the idea that God must be like us. Please. As Stanley Kubrick once pointed out, the discovery of more intelligent life somewhere other than earth would be catastrophic to man, simply because we would no longer be able to think of ourselves as the centre of the universe. I guess I’m slowly becoming one of those crusty old cranks that thinks animals are better than people. But, occasionally, people will pleasantly surprise me and I’ll fall in love with one of them, so go figure.’

(Things the grandchildren should know, Mark Oliver Everett)

‘The two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was already several, there was already quite a crowd. Here we have made use of everything that came within range, what was closest as well as farthest away. We have assigned clever pseudonyms to prevent recognition. Why have we kept our own names? Out of habit, purely out of habit. To make ourselves unrecognizable in turn. To render imperceptible, not ourselves, but what makes us act, feel, and think. Also because it’s nice to talk like everybody else, to say the sun rises, when everybody knows it’s only a manner of speaking. To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.’

(A Thousand Plateaus, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari)
The Start: London to Guildford

‘I like to think how easily Nature will absorb London as she absorbed the mastodon, setting her spiders to spin the winding sheet and her worms to fill in the graves, and her grass to cover it pitifully up, adding flowers - as an unknown hand added them to the grave of Nero.’

(The South Country, Edward Thomas)

‘The smooth express to Brighton has scarcely, as it seems, left the metropolis when the banks of the railways become coloured with wild flowers. Seen for a moment in swiftly passing, they border the line like a continuous garden. Driven from the fields by plough and hoe, cast out from the pleasure-grounds of modern houses, pulled up and hurled over the wall to wither as accursed things, they have taken refuge on the embankment and the cutting... There they can flourish and ripen their seeds, little harassed even by the scythe and never by grazing cattle. So it happens that, extremes meeting, the wild flower, with its old-world associations, often grows most freely within a few feet of the wheels of the locomotive.’

(Nature Near London: To Brighton, Richard Jefferies)

March 2011: when spring looked to be about to spurt into action and the bleak winter days were drawing to an end. It began at a house on Shelgate Road, Clapham, where Edward Thomas, the poet, had lived as a child. The first stint of cycling, headed south west out of the capital. It ended at a Travelodge on the outskirts of Guildford. And staved off the emptiness that was about to pervade my psyche, after looping his spiritual home - the poetic nucleus of Steep, East Hampshire - for a final time, a day earlier. The point of the day, the whole journey, was to travel back further in time, to the period in his life before he wrote poetry. I had a feeling that this voyage, to the Quantock Hills from his childhood home in London, was an important milestone
for Edward on his way to becoming a poet. And that he became a bard on that bike, riding and writing, *In Pursuit of Spring*; eventually summoning Coleridge on the lane to Holford. I suspected that this sort of expedition was a common exercise in the life of a poet and needed to be undertaken as part of a poetic-apprenticeship. *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, Frost at Midnight*, and *Kubla Kahn* awaited me, summonable, along with the first poems Edward wrote only a few weeks after completing, *In Pursuit of Spring*. The poetic-passage may encourage the writing of poetry - either en-route or once home - more so than when placing poetry with the *Fellowship*. De-coupling poetry from place, riding cross-country, could encourage a freer more redemptive poetics of space to occur, as I chase the tracks made by Edward. First of all though the city had to be negotiated; we had to pack up our panniers and begin to pedal. In the dry sack strapped across the rack were a few books other than *In Pursuit of Spring*. In no particular order; *The Rings of Saturn*, *Austerlitz*, *London Orbital*, *Edge of the Orison*, *Nature Near London*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, *The Icknield Way*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *On the Road*. And a couple of books of poetry too: *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poems*, and *Edward Thomas: Collected Poems*. They were gazed at intermittently. Spread across two panniers were these, mostly borrowed, things: compass, map, cagoule, jeans, coat, t-shirts, shirts, wooly jumper, hoody, gloves, scarf, hat, laptop, camera, waterproof trousers, shoes, food, water, lock, spare inner tubes, pump, allen keys, tyre levers, socks, and underwear. Meaning the bike was heavy. Edward may as well have been sat on the back. A special swinging action was required to get it up off the ground. I pointed the bike in the right direction and climbed on. It was about ten before Edward pushed off towards the mid-Victorian pub; *The Nightingale*. I followed Edward down Nightingale Lane, not knowing whether it was possible nowadays, nearly a century later, to cycle the same route, or whether a Romantic sensibility would disperse athwart the landscape, as the crankshaft turned slowly and nervously inches from the curb. The route passed by, after only a minute cycling, an Indian restaurant called fittingly; *Bombay Bicycle Club*. And as the road flattened and the bike got up to speed, the cycle to Guildford felt less daunting. Despite a long queue of cars waiting for the lights up ahead, down the side of which I had to slip the width of a shopping trolley. The suburban by-streets looked rideable enough though even with the lack of breadth, as they had been when Edward
rode them. They were false prophets though according to Edward, as the main roads were very different. This was bound to still be the case but with yet more cars and buses, lorries and scooters to contend with. And as predicted, it was not long before the roads clogged and heavy traffic pushed us tight to the gutter. Leaving us freewheeling down Burnwood Lane bumping over drains arse off saddle: jumping the panniers, and shaking the rack. The dry sack, as a result, separated itself into two lumps of matter dangling either side of the back wheel, held only precariously across its middle by two thin bungee cords. I was beyond Wandsworth Common with its ornamental ponds, venerable elms and joggers circuiting; the railway, the dead straight Trinity Road and a quaint row of village type shops, before the potential disaster was noticed - barely clocking the extensive open space to the right, clocking nearly twenty mph downhill, staring at the messed up tarmac. After every single pothole, I turned to check the bright red dry sack was still flopped over the rack, as it was obvious the elastic bands were being loosened jolt by jolt. Until by Garratt Green, I could pull into a side street and stop the juggernaut safely. I was barely a mile into the journey. And the bike was already running away with me.

Out of Clapham. The large terracing, stinking rich, gave way to more modest housing. An estate of concrete flats flanked the empty green. Riding the route to Wimbledon that Edward walked a few times during his schooldays. A three-mile trail that went by Wandsworth, Earlsfield, and Wimbledon: whichever way he took, the Wandle had to be crossed. The middle way through Earlsfield; crossing the Wandle at the paper mills was the best way to do so. The smell of the mills wafted over a mile and a half on certain still evenings and gave Edward a quiet sort of poetic delight. To get to the Wandle on this occasion, we nipped down Huntspill Road, a typical London terraced side street, the brick paler than up north. Edward thought at once of the Huntspill in Somerset. Plough Lane was affecting in much the same way; a shock of ploughed fields, through what Edward thought was New Wimbledon. To the right, a closed pub, and Summerstown arcing around the back of Wimbledon Stadium; the dog racing track. On the left, hiding the cemetery, were a couple of gigantic grey boxes: DIY places. Behind the stadium too, there were more: smaller signage, completely unidentified hangars in some cases. At a petrol station, Copper Mill Lane zags off to the right; and a modest grey box selling carpets sits on the
fork, guarding the entrance to the industrial estate, like an old gate house. At the end of the lane was a car dealership, hanging on the edge of the river, mimicking a mill. A loop of the estate revealed little. Tarmac and corrugated metal. Cars in the car park but no people. On the other side of the river more DIY places and car showrooms. All in all, the bland functional architecture, monstrosely banal, epicly dull, hugged the banks from Wandle Park to Garratt Park: an archetypal non-place typical of our supermodernity, the same everywhere and popping up all over - it could be in any city. Dotted down the purpose built wide modern roads Waterside Way, Riverside Way, Endeavour Way and Weir Road were industrial units, holding crates, food and drink wholesalers, distributors, home delivery services, pallet depots, shipping containers, enclosed in a riverside estate - old industry replaced by new, skirting a now useless sparkling squiggle of water, shielded by elms. A mixture of the sordid and the delicate in this suburban landscape, just as Edward had noted and enjoyed a century earlier. A liminal zone of informal nature: Edgeland, Drosscape, Bastard Countryside, Unofficial Countryside. Once allotments, the irregular low buildings of a laundry, horses, a shed or two, a chamois-leather mill, blossoming fruit trees, cows, a file and tool factory, the electricity works, and some caravans, gave on to Wandle Park and Garratt Park, now a clean grey modern retail park does. Landscapes of empty shells, hollow bar a few goods at their base. It was time to cross the mean featureless bridge, over the widened river. Where the mud of the bank denotes town edge; festooned with cans, strewn with plastic bags. Down Milton Road and Cowper Road you can gaze at the great estate across the winding river. Further down, near Chaucer Way, Burns Close, Kipling Drive, and Shelley Way, a meadow comes to the railway and the bins behind one of the stores. Here the wildflowers are left alone, and thriving. Round about this great estate; trees, flowers, shrubs, are disregarded to a large extent, backing on to a railway, a river, roads, and a cemetery. No cattle are present. And fat footed ramblers are off wandering the Downs instead. It was meant to be aesthetically wrong; a nothingness of a sight really. Yet the scrubland at the back of the sanitized retailland had a haunting quality. It disturbed - unkempt, haphazard, and overlooked. The graves gazed with. There was a wonderful behindness to the whole scene. London has many sides. This side was strikingly unpeopled, forgotten, and as such eerie: a secret garden, for those who bothered to look. The ugliness of the grey box and the bins added
not detracted, thrilling the eye. Juxtaposition and mixing was the key - odd combinations of stuff to peruse on the spot. A fluid rural-urban fringe made clunkingly visible. Other taller buildings engulfed the horizon, not hills, and the hum of the city carried on the breeze. These messy bits of England have been ignored for too long - since the days of Richard Jefferies and the classic series of excursions, *Nature Near London* - as has been acknowledged recently by poets Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley. Coleridge and Wordsworth, Thoreau and Emerson, Frost and Thomas are rooted within the reason for these sites being overlooked. It all comes back to the idea of wilderness and the sublime - see the William Cronon chapter from 1995: *The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*. A desolate, baron, deserted place before the poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Thoreau, and Emerson. Their words altered what the people of the time thought of the vast open landscapes of North America and the United Kingdom - rewiring aesthetic appreciation. This new aesthetic became, in a relatively short period of time, the way people imagined true nature - sacred mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers, grass lands, huge sky, animals and clouds roaming. To be at one with it, in solitude, and experience the sublime, like painters and poets, was desirable and not terrifying. They became places to preserve; being the only places on earth where it was supposedly possible to glimpse the face of God. Wild landscape was tamed by a few intrepid poets celebrating inhuman beauty. Nature became not us, not society, rather out there, beyond the city. In reality though, these vast swathes of land were no more inhuman than the *Edgelands* of cities. They were not untouched. Conversely cities are no less natural; they contain wilderness and nature. Wilderness as such, needs to be rethought. And nature more generally needs to be rethought - it is, like wilderness, a word that has changed in meaning over time - just as Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley have argued in their book celebrating jittery, jumbled, broken ground on the edges of cities, ignored by people: a *true wilderness*. Their point could be expanded further, and become all encompassing, travelling beyond brownfield sites. All is *Edgelands*. Humans are never fully alone, set apart from humanity, in an untouched landscape. To exist is to participate in a network. And we are all several already, touched by others, and schizophrenic. Poets of today are imbued with the work of past poets not through choice. Nature is fluid, an incessant series of dynamic processes, a succession of *Edgelands*. Place is to blame, bounding and bordering, rural
and urban, nature and society. Four or five concrete rectangles clung on at the other end of the meadow I stood in. And the odd brick wall stuck up out of the ground in defiance. Grass will soon cover it all pitifully up. Flowers are yet to be added.

These were the inner suburbs. Parklife and the habitual voyeurs - I was still on the Northern Line. Houses were packed in, terraced, the main shopping streets busy. It was the proper commuter belt, old suburbia: the extent of the underground. Density loosens as the belt loosens. And Boris Bikes diminish with the cycle superhighway. Riding down Merton High Street towards Wimbledon South Station, trees lined the nearside of the road. The far side had a few shops, a newsagent, takeaways in the main. Hardy Road met the high street half way down. Railings prevented the panniers from passing cars at the busy intersection by the underground. The cross hatchings were full and a couple of cars jumped the lights, as usual. The pub on the corner was already frequented by at least a few visible smokers, stood out front in the spring sunshine. It was unseasonably warm. As the road widened and crossed a dual carriage way - the a24 - a clutch of grey boxes revealed itself. Again it was on the banks of the Wandle. And again backed on to a park; Morden Hall Park on this occasion. Poplars brushed the edge of it, as well as elms. Everything charmlessly ordered from the bike. No madness. There may be some mess, off the road, around the back of the façade. Some scrub. Although from where I was sat, all I could see was an increasing number of semi-detached houses, with neat little gardens, and a car or two on the drive. These were the outer suburbs - modern suburbia, interwar suburbia. The mini roundabout and the high-street confirmed so. I had passed through an invisible line somewhere between Merton High Street and Morden Hall Park. A brick wall, too tall to see over, hid the park. Beyond here the terraced houses became semi-detached houses almost entirely. A small arch in the weathered wall, marked by a huge light bulb, encouraged a peek. On the solid blue door, wide open, was written: Welcome to Morden Hall Park, Car Park Open 8am-6pm, For the use of patrons only. A garden-centre and a tea-shop sat immediately behind the signage. It was inhospitable. The single storey stables type building with a fully peopled terrace, was directly over the other side of a narrow stream and was lined by a picket fence. Too neat and tidy, too Sunday best, stiff upper lip and uncomfortable: a bit prude and twee. Cream
teas and house plants for sale, some terracotta pots: a gnome. Beyond the car park and bottle bank, somewhere was a lake; cuckoo-pint, goose-grass, and celandine, farther on, growing in the wetlands by the Wandle, near the cast-iron foot-bridge painted white. Ancient towering trees made up for the lack of flowers, and the lush grass, enclosing the strip of water along with reeds. I did not bother with the rose garden. Houses alongside the route had flowerbeds full.

Some meadows were outside the perimeter of possible deviation, a mile or so distant according to the map. No psychogeographic detour this time. The meadow could not draw me from the old planned route, as each view across the park taken lead me back to the pursuit and the road. Roads that had become wider and greener. Parks bigger, houses larger, or at least less squeezed in and narrow. Cycling easier. On the stretch, from Morden Park to Nonsuch Park this was certainly the case. Edward Thomas passed me between the parks, going the other way, back up London - the name in large letters, on the side of a coach - triggering the calves and thighs to push harder and the mood in the air around about to lighten, what with the jolly sight, reminding, haunting, and encouraging, on my homage to Edward. The sort of sight necessary for the casual day-tripper, in and out of poesis. Wordsworth Drive was only a few streets back down the London Road, and was appropriately about to be passed by the Edward Thomas coach: suburban-sprawl that continued all the way to Ewell, whereupon reaching the outskirts of, the Ewell by-pass did as it said and took me to Epsom. And for the first time all day we parted ways. Edward went on to Ewell - he described it as having the same general effect as Epsom, but less definite and complete, so there was no point in going back. It was nice to get some speed up on the smoother and wider by-pass. The sad houses, less well kept, ruined by the road, softened and cushioned the sound waves for other suburbanites. The wind blew hard against my face, and along with the sun, dried streaks of white salty sweat in streaks down my temples. I rolled leisurely down to the high street. Epsom was the first real town on the route. It felt like a separate entity to the capital all-encompassing city, rather than a suburb of. The clock tower at the end of the high street provided it with a market town, or country town style vista, drawing the visitor forth. It must have been lunch time as the streets were heaving. More a weekend than a weekday feel about it. A tourist hub, a countrified tourist town: the races, a jug of pims, country club, independent shops, tweed, golf course, and the not so distant Downs.
Roads went off in all directions. I continued down the main thoroughfare though, passing workers on their lunch, shoppers, young kids in prams, towards the clock tower, with its weather vane. Before I could reach it though the road fell away to the left and cars were heading towards me. There was a sign saying simply: All Traffic. Nothing else, no place names, no symbol. And there was nowhere to stop. That was the extent of my visit to Epsom. Cycling can do that to a place. Beyond Epsom the suburbs were back; large bland detached fascias sat at a distance from the road. The houses where the city-slickers, the high-flyers live, on the very edge of the city: nearly at the moat of m25, on the edge of the green-belt. And the first sign of the coming stockbroker belt. Epsom had managed to evade the numbing swell of the city somehow. Ashstead had not. After an insane swirl of houses - actually shaped like a snail shell on the map - just passed and stupidly wound around, I had to stop. The sense of being out of place, looked at, looked down upon, in a panopticon of a circling and tightening street was overwhelming. Anybody who is not supposed to be there feels the need to leave. The suburbs in general were draining; the stupid modern dream, only coated with a thin veneer of perfection, belies a slow descent into madness. The m25 was not far from Ashstead. It was open countryside from then on. Over the city wall to freedom, post sitting outside a café, people watching for a while - some scaffolders opposite in particular, fags in mouths, climbing up and down a ladder carrying planks on their shoulders, one twisted severely and nearly took a head off; sorry darlin, sorry darlin. The Leg of Mutton pub beside the men, reminded the hill of roughly the same name: his hill, his memorial stone, his poems, the walks in Steep. A short trip to a public toilet pushing the bike passed a few massive homes, exceedingly big for the obscenely rich, with a swimming pool and a tennis court in the garden. The city was fading by this point - its pull diminishing, the feeling of pace and liveliness, vibrant life.

On the road again in the company of Edward; within moments the m25 was beneath. The tall dense trees stopped and glistening droplets flowed steadily in lines down to the left. No jam to report, eight lanes of autobahn running uncharacteristically smoothly. It happened so quickly: in a flash of tarmac and car with no fanfare. London was exited; at speed. The extent of the city, its limits, its scrag ends tied off, encircled neatly. The road a green belt: lined with aspens,
squeezed by quaint suburb - not like the near continuous city of the north, stretching from Liverpool to Hull, bused across by Iain Sinclair. We parted ways, beyond the m25, as Sinclair crossed our path, Edward and I. Taking instead by choice, a deviant road by-passing Leatherhead, the marine and aviation division of a multinational oil and gas corporation, and some poems - a John Helston one about its waterways and a John Skelton one about an ancient pub there. For the first time, on the pass, the scene ahead was opened out. Tunnel vision was disconnected. The skyline was unfastened. It fell down to the ground. Landscape as a way of seeing ensued: the eye of a painter inserted. Blue - lots of blue - a big sky, and only a shallow rolling smooth green horizon. Photography happened on a bona fide road - a serious long distance thing, wide, open, without housing flanking. Pastoralist thoughts, old nature thoughts, Romantic thoughts, awash and colour the sliding scene, in front then beside. The eye unleashed, lapped up the new extent of its vision. Free from the pressure of the megacity - buildings cowering over, people overcrowding. And the invisible influence - its pace, your restlessness, the endless commerce, networks in the ether. Cars passed at pace, barely noticed from the luxurious spacious cycle path. While exhaling at length, breathing in slowly, and dragging up lovely air. Contentedness bathed the land ahead. The rhythmic upping and downing of the legs continued, mimicking the rib cage. And speed remained constant. My whole body relaxed, being concentrated solely on the task; the road. Eye free to gaze, to scan, the need to remain vigilant reduced: distances, shapes, angles, textures, lines, squiggles, nets, curves, patterns, simple geometry, efficient solutions, structure. Complexity playing out against competing forces: an apparent randomness underwritten by mathematical rules - rules that can explain the patterns in everything, and provide a reason for why things look and behave as they do. Yet still there is poetry created, endeavoring to explain the scene unfurling. Real cyclists sped by: lycra, good posture, racing bike. Perfectly flat ground helped them out. Some of the trees were full, others leafless spindly dark sticks. Ivy wrapped itself around many, giving an impression of spring. Puffs of fluff, spherical catkins, blew about, on closer inspection, beneath a knotted yew, fleeced by beech and ash. The low sunbeams sprayed shadows across the road from which. Light, chopped up, sliced by naked arms and hands, strobed with continuous movement; the siren of the sun. We could have both continued on to Guildford more directly, but literature, the
Mickleham Downs, the Mole Gap drew us due south - to Daniel Defoe visiting the early tourist attraction of Box Hill in the 1720s whilst writing *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, John Keats finishing *Endymion* at the *Burford Bridge Inn*, Jane Austen’s *Emma* having a disappointing picnic atop Box Hill, poet George Meredith living at Flint Cottage below Box Hill, visited by Robert Louis Stevenson in March 1878 and later by Leslie Stephen and the *Sunday Tramps* with an ancestor of C, R.G Marsden, who by then, during intervals, had taken charge of the whole flock, in tow. An arc of road, bent left, and then diffracted away around Mickleham, looping for miles. The sweeping, meandering tarmac lined with shade by a thin stretch of pavement copse, befriended a river; the Mole, down to the right continuously peeping, beyond the border of trees, with its glistening water and high banks. I stopped for an apple, at the Old London Road, and wheeled the bike over to the weak single track bridge that spanned the river, leaning it against the elaborate cast iron handrail, freshly painted white - the old entrance to Mickleham - before looking for brown trout in the darkness beneath its arches, peering silently into the depths; *A London Trout* to be specific, hiding and swimming from Gatwick downstream towards Cobham, tacky cheating footballers, and eventually the Thames near Hampton Court Palace, spawning, rather appropriately. Back up London, to the metropolis, to meet J.G Ballard, Iain Sinclair, Will Self, and others. A fishy flâneur implicit in a piece of psychogeography written well before the Letterists, the Situationists and Guy Debord had begun using the term. Appearing eventually in the *London Standard* as part of a series of dérives by Richard Jefferies called; *Nature Near London* - a new cartography, describing urban nature, deconstructing boundaries. And like the psychogeography done for the *Guardian* by Will Self, the works were collected up and made into a book of the same name. There were no trout about though, but rather than taking the Old London Road through Mickleham, I pedaled slowly by the riverside, facing away from the road and out to the pale corn past the opposite bank. Celandines peeked through the scraggly dry grass. More and more cyclists passed by, in shade beneath large leaved horse-chestnuts and tiny leafed elm. The river swept away to be cuddled by a wooded smoothly rising ridge. A train line emerged from the treed scarp on the apex of the meander, forcing its way between road and river; cutting a perfectly straight path through the landscape. All was suffused in the sort of weather that lifts the spirits - the sun came round the
back of Box Hill, and faced head on, inundating, blinding, as the old and the new road to London met, rejuvenating an aching body in the way only good March weather can. Motorcycles, lots of them, were parked up there, outside a shack. People, all helmeted, visors open glinting away, wandered back and forth. Lots sat on wooden pub benches smoking, eating; a hum of chatter coasted, laughter also intermittently. Nipping through the abnormally large expanse of tarmac adjacent - a white circuit painted upon it - and stopping momentarily for a quick drink. The bicycle came back to life and slowly climbed the ground, aslant, after doubling back down the old road, body too, weaving, rocking, standing, puffing, sweating, tensing, ascending all the way up the side of Box Hill; road, railway, river, a neat plait beneath the steep chalk, and Flint Cottage a speck - there, up there, from a skylark’s eye view; at once twittering and swooping, softly spoken words and a single violin, poet and composer, George Meredith of Box Hill and Ralph Vaughan Williams, are naturally thought of, mimicking and becoming, The Lark Ascending. Box Hill is England; The Lark Ascending is England - an imagining of England, an insubstantial fairy place, this England, old already, was called merry; simplicity, harmony, embrace, a soundtrack saturated with English sunbeam and zephyr. Edward knew this as well as anyone, as half unawares it came home to him - I think of Meredith as I should not think of other poets in their territories. He was not so much an admirer and lover of nature, like other poets, as a part of her, one of her most splendid creatures, fit to be ranked with the white-beam, the lark, and the south-west wind. A graveled bridleway weaved its way up further to the domed peak, as did ancient box woodland, snaking across lengthy dry meadow. Cyclists circuited the hill in training for the Olympics, following the planned route for the upcoming road race event at the 2012 games. On the edge of the capital, just outside the orbital motorway, I swooped down instead to intercept Keats, descending to more and more violins, at great speed, a crescendo of noise, until the ground gently flattens itself and all falls silent. Faintly, a bird chirped up again, and the tone poem was briefly heard once more, before dying completely; violin, skylark, and poetry, departed. Stepping stones, the Mole, the Burford Bridge Inn, Keats, and Endymion, took their place abruptly. And a fisher with fly, waist deep, whipping silently for trout. A London Trout: one of the clever ones that outwit even the keenest and compleat angler, a trout such as the one which beguiled Richard Jefferies - a tiny part of the mass of Nature Near
*London* found by the writer. I was, at three, still orbiting the capital; stuck in orbit, dragged south and then east by poets, trapped in the dustbins of Iain Sinclair, floating, drowning, in Hackney Marshes. It was time to break out of orbit, shift up a gear, forget the footprints and unearth the tyre tracks; head for Guildford by way of Wotton, Shere, and Shalford.

Post Box Hill, we slipped in and out of reverie; the poetics of space working nicely. Down the Mole Gap, thinking of the Watford Gap, slippery brown trout and Richard Jefferies some more, still following the river, and the other great topographical book Edward wrote, *The Icknield Way* - piecing together a fractured ancient road, straddling the north of the capital, walking to Liddington Hill, Swindon, and *Jefferies Land*. After a few hours of riding and reading - moving quickly towards the rising road and the Downs, a hollow land, and a narrow wood called Deerlap Wood - it became increasingly clear that Edward Thomas was a great literary critic. He understood where everybody fitted in the map of literary history, the geography of their territories, the arguments, and politics that undergirded. What he could not fathom was where he fitted, being racked with self-doubt. *In Pursuit of Spring*, celebrates others, placing them in the foreground. His work was energised by their work, imbued with a sense of their greater importance. The topographic writing sets up the chance to write about another person or event, and is written in a way which denies the subject its usual place; decentring it, enhancing it, and giving it a distressing haunting fleeting quality, in a manner now synonymous with the work of W.G Sebald - positing a knowledge that would be lost were it not for his saving and noting. What is clear from these interjections is who Edward liked and disliked, and who he would like to have been compared to but never imagined he would. Edward was for this, the original *Literary Hitchhiker*. Demonstrating his understanding of the importance of writers to regions, and in region-building, *A Literary Pilgrim in England* is a mapping, a cartographic undertaking, a construction of mini-biographies of a writer, their work and their environment - beginning in London and the Home Counties, with William Blake, Charles Lamb, Keats, and Meredith, before moving on to The Thames, and Shelley, Matthew Arnold, and William Morris, The Downs and the South Coast, and John Aubrey, Gilbert White, William Cobbett, William Hazlitt, Richard Jefferies, Thomas Hardy, and Hilaire Belloc, The West Country, and Herrick,
Coleridge, and W.H Hudson, The East Coast and Midlands, and Cowper, George Crabbe, John Clare, Fitzgerald, George Borrow, Tennyson, and Swinburne, The North, and Wordsworth, and Emily Bronte, finally ending up in Scotland, with Burns, Scott, and R.L Stevenson. The biographies he penned and his topographic work *Oxford, Wales, The South Country, The Country*, the pursuits to *Coleridge Country* and *Jefferies Land* further clear up whom he liked to hitchhike with. The biography of Richard Jefferies was his best; a homage to a much-loved literary forebear - unlike the biographies of Maurice Maeterlinck and George Borrow, writers he was less drawn to. The articulation of the life of Richard Jefferies, anticipated his own future. For Edward, Richard Jefferies was more than a nature writer: he was a guiding spirit of the English landscape, affecting a profound influence upon his own writings. Edward regarded Jefferies as somewhat of a mentor, once describing the body of work he created as a gospel, an incantation. A similar mystic communion with nature draws them together. Jefferies is best known for his writings about nature and the countryside; site-writing and memory-work created from wanderings, ending up in a sort of prose-poetry. His birthplace, Coate, on the outskirts of Swindon, provided the background to all his major works of fiction and many of his essays. But like Edward, he also wrote extensively about London and its surrounds, about towns, about the salvo of coming industrialisation, and about the perceived loss of a harmonious interaction between nature and people, a rural order - a loss that came to define them both as writers, indeed for Edward, loss became his poetic source, down the line. The weaving together of supposed urban sites, and rural settings, over the course of a book, is interesting. Theirs is not a naive celebration of flora and fauna, and a dumb blast at modern society, a meditation on purely the trees and the hills; the landscape is specifically peopled, in fact the story is often told through the people they meet out walking. Their books are altogether more complicated, precise, witty, technical, nuanced, scholarly, and painterly. Clever readings of landscape as they witnessed it, describing its buildings and infrastructure, its visual qualities, its sensuous atmosphere, as well as the practices of the time, for both leisure and work: the manipulation and transformation of things, fishing, swimming, shooting, walking, cycling, labouring, ploughing, cooking, eating, travelling by train, drinking in pubs, shopping at markets, and going to an art gallery. As such they act as little time capsules, admixtures of social commentary, environmental action, and
personal musings; archaeological exercises, presenting a complicated picture of loss, and demonstrating the value of artistic imagination. There are further sympathetic resonances between Edward Thomas and Richard Jefferies. A family connection: Edward holidayed as a child in Swindon, where his grandmother lived - part of his intellectual and spiritual development. Their life spans - Edward lived only four months longer. A creative intensity squeezed into the last few years - a slow gathering, followed by a late spate, and fulfilment of creative being; a deep pool fills up until it overflows. I once walked in the footsteps of Richard Jefferies. Edward was there as always. It was a guided walk with readings. An event jointly hosted by the Edward Thomas Fellowship and the Richard Jefferies Society. No prior booking was required. And everyone was welcome to explore his home, watch the film Jefferies Land, and share readings from his work, and the work of Edward. People gathered at the Richard Jefferies Museum, Coate, near Swindon, for a 10.30 start, ready to walk along the east-side of Coate Water, over Cicely’s Bridge, to the Gamekeeper’s Cottage at Hodson. Once there we could look around the garden and view the old thatched cottage and the bluebells in Hodson Woods, before returning by the west side of Coate Water, for lunch at the Sun Inn. It took place a day after an informal study day held at Liddington Village Hall, Wiltshire, devoted to Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas, their shared interests and concerns, and the Wiltshire landscape they both knew and wrote about. The car park was full that day. And cars blocked in other cars, with no other parking available. The hall was cold with a second-hand book stall on the left and tea and cakes on the right. Jem Poster, the poet, novelist, and literary scholar, who is currently preparing a new edition of Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work by Edward Thomas, was the keynote speaker. His lecture was entitled, First Known When Lost: Edward Thomas, Richard Jefferies and the Rural World - a lecture about the loss of rural life, rural order, the harmonious interaction between nature and man, beginning with Oliver Goldsmith’s poem The Deserted Village, from 1770, which apparently marks the earliest point at which a sense of loss of rural life, farm life, village life, is dealt with in a sustained way poetically; presenting it not as a lost Eden such as in Paradise Lost. The Pre-Romantic poem, a response to social and industrial revolution, and celebrating age-old countryside practices, a fallen world, influenced the Romantics. Nature seemed on the flitting, elevating Romanticism, and Coleridge. A seasonal
decline and a perceived loss of poetic inspiration, led to more poets travelling, usually on foot, around the country, to interpret loss, in a state of destitution - John Clare, *Decay* for example. Post Romanticism, poets complicated and subverted, the picture of loss further - Edward Thomas and other poets were marked by the loss of traditional earthly practice, the mechanisation of war and agriculture, military tank and mass-produced tractor - thinking themselves into an earthly immortality, a form of transcendence, disappointed with what they witnessed: early environmentalists. Edward Thomas went on to write poetry in a ghostly manner, evoking homelessness, and a lack of belonging or dwelling for any length of time, everything seems fleeting, changeable, crumbling, decaying, pure presence is replaced by a sense of absence, an aesthetic of failure, dislocation, and death. Edward was never on the chocolate box, despite what many think. But that was all after cycling *In Pursuit of Spring*: the journey, which was pivotal in his becoming a poet, providing inspiration for his first poems - sections of the book being turned into verse. The war, and meeting Robert Frost crystallising his thought process. Plus the time was right to fulfil a lifelong ambition.

After Dorking: off the London Road and on to the Guildford Road. And into the Surrey Hills: area of outstanding natural beauty. The sun was out still, as the road thinned. Land hollowed out, all arable to the Downs on the right: a continuous ridge. Something was being burnt in the distance - smoke floated over towards the road, surrounding a church in the centre of the hollow. None of the London cyclists were left. No walkers either. Were it not for cars; the landscape would have been eerily unpeopled, with farm houses the only sign of inhabitants. Light began to fail me by the time of reaching Gomshall. And cycling was becoming tiresome; with the road weaving its way upwards, steeply, narrowing all the time, and the landscape gaining a more sinister edge. Two pubs at Gomshall, sat directly beside a canal, looked quiet; everything else in the place was hidden from road view. Nothing was welcoming. It was necessary to stop there and put on a reflective sash, so quickly was darkness descending. A road such should not be cycled in bad light - cars inches away, struggling to get by: their engines growling behind as they changed down the gears, looming, to speed around and away, angered by my presence. At Silent Pool, the road split in two, as the lanes diverged. There Edward also
took a detour, and went for a look at the oblong pond, the size of a swimming pool; watching the trout gliding in the pallid green. It would have only twinkled in the twilight anyway, so I continued instead, head down, aiming for Guildford. An unrelenting stream of cars passed by at high speeds, and some less confident drivers sat in the slipstream of the bike, damming the flow, holding up traffic. Beeping abounded, over the constant gargling of petrol, as did nervousness. And in almost complete darkness, a thin gilding over the hills distant, we parted ways involuntarily - I carried on up the busy road hemmed in by cars, none the wiser. There was nowhere to stop up the few mile climb through beech wood, to the high point of Newlands Corner; no space to rest, on the sunken road. It was only once atop the corner there was somewhere to pull in and look at a map, and realise the costly error made. Body then wrecked from the unnecessary uphill ride, I leant against a bench, on the apex of the long bend, staring out from the clearing made for an epic sight across hilly darkness; a corona crowned the ridge far opposite, and the land undulated between, dotted with dark tree spots. Edward was taking it easy down below, trundling through some more pretty villages in linear formation, beside the quiet road; passing Albury, Chilworth, and Shalford, talking of churches, ponds, and mills. There was no time to wait around and enjoy the view, drink it in and recover, as what little light there was left was essential without a headlight. Cycling, almost immediately back over to the road, and once again underneath the canopy of trees, cowering over the narrow stretch. It was impossible to think about anything other than keeping the bike moving in a straight line. Getting to Guildford was the sole goal. Artistic, painterly, poetic eyes were removed. And I stared dead ahead, or down at the tyre and tarmac, concentrated only on not becoming some of the abundant road kill. Head removed of anything superfluous to the task of manoeuvring a bicycle. Hands clamped to the bars, blistering, cold, oily and battered, arms locked tight in position, legs pushing down, one after the other, at a slow steady rhythm, aching beyond belief. Everything burned, panting, dizzy; all loneliness was abated for the first time in years, despite being more alone than ever. Thoughts only went to Guildford. Not to the usual places that haunt the everyday. When the road eventually flattened completely, widened, and met the Epsom Road - a place I had visited briefly what seemed like days earlier - the relief was huge after the never-ending ascent. Houses, lots of them, on either side, greeted cheerfully, as did the normally
lifeless chain stores, restaurants, and pubs, found everywhere. The buzz of a bustling town was palpable, a familiarity calming the lost, overly ambitious cyclist, massaging pained muscles; gliding comfortably into town to twinkling street lamps, moonlight and stars amongst pitch blackness, with an evening chorus of commuting. I was still rolling - all the way down the relatively quiet high street with passages spouting off - when Edward walked haphazardly back in to view. It was just before the confusing one way system of what seemed to be a sort of ring road - in reality the road to Farnham that we would be taking the next day. He emerged and headed off again, along Quarry Street and Mill Lane, travelling at a fair old pace to his hotel on Porridge Pot Alley, with no conversation left in him. It seemed an affluent place Guildford. An Italian Restaurant owned by celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver, sat opposite the station. The first one was opened in Oxford a few years ago, back in the halcyon days before recession, when we wandered happy amongst the cobbles, domes, and spires, the foreboding grandeur. The haunting spirit of the place so thick you could almost smell it, layers and layers of the stuff, in the bones of the place, a thick mildew: moths to a flickering candle. London, Brighton, Bath, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol, Cambridge, Cheltenham, Cambridge, Portsmouth, Leeds, Reading, Glasgow, Sydney, and Dubai all have one now. A board of meat and cheese tempted from the menu, shining through the mass of curved glass. But again I was not drawn from the road. And instead pointed the bike towards Walnut Tree Close and crossed the busy road, weaving first of all around railings. The close turned in to an industrial estate, squashed, squeezed slim, by the railway line, and the river: grey boxes, DIY again mainly, car showrooms also. I was back in Wimbledon, on the banks of the Wandle. Something was not quite right. It had been cleaned up and was now a strange stretch of newly planted Edgeland, surrounded by the usual basic architecture; box after box. The domain of the jogger and the dog walker: a cyclist thoroughfare. There was the odd, odd wooden sculpture. Other than which, all was beautifully bland and flat - perfect after a day of big landscape and cycling. And only rightly the Travelodge sparkled and looked out over the river, beside some more scrub bland, with the railway at its back and the a3 and a25 further penning in. Nowhere obvious to lock a bike: a hotel for a driver, sited on the edge of town, with good motorway access.
Inside all was well. The reception gave on to the bar and dining room, where a music channel blurted out the latest chart entry. And people sat alone, attempting to ignore it, drinking beer, eating chips. The fryer had packed up by the time I got to the bar, so I had to order a five bean chilli - it was pretty much the only thing on the menu not fried. A couple came down for a moment and took pre-ordered food immediately back up to their bedroom - without chips their meals looked ludicrously insubstantial. On the table behind, someone was desperately trying to organise a night out in Guildford, rather than stay in the bar any longer. In no time at all the five bean chilli turned up with four different types of beans in it; the black-eyed peas began to play loudly though, making up the remainder. After eating, instead of staying downstairs I took two bottles of beer up to my room and drank them in the bath, staring up at the ceiling and not moving, drinking the elixir; heat a revitalising tonic. There were no paintings on the walls and the decor was only simple blocks of colour, mostly white. With nothing to distract, the experiences of the day began to swirl amongst the heat haze. Mirror fully thick with condensation, the question of the point of all this returned. And the aims were qualified and re-qualified, as they were after each day of cycling. It was the question of the crisis of representation in the main, which I continually came back to each day, onwards from the beer bath, and circled, desperately working memory: the need to understand my own thoughts about subjectivity completely, mixed in with a desire to remove Edward - and poetry and nature writing more generally - from the chocolate box. What else was behind that Travelodge mirror? The ghosts of illicit affairs: dirty-weekends playing away, in the anonymous world of the off-highway motel, wipe clean surfaces, lonely wanderers, coming together, selling product, living the nomadic motorway life. Me on my pursuit, alone and bruised, emotionally drained, half-cut; watching documentaries about lions, savannah - on safari, unrecognisable. Through the surface bits and pieces, steamed up, Edward and his world, cocooned; where the pretty villages remain intact by a sleepy roadside. Behind the glass all is well; we cycle the parallel universe of the semi-mythical South Country. The story itself about fifty miles down the road in Dunbridge: a century into the past.
Preston, June 2011
'What happened to the ambitions of poets here in Britain? Have they not digested the news that Edward Thomas and his world are gone forever?'

(Youth, J.M. Coetzee)

‘On the eastern slope of the Lea Valley is Epping Forest; the people’s forest, festooned with burger cartons, silver cans, ghosts of prisoners, runaways, pastoral melancholics (cop killer Harry Roberts, poets John Clare, Alfred Tennyson, Edward Thomas). On the west is the old forest of Middlesex, Enfield Chase. The broad, marshy floodplain of the Lea is a natural boundary.’

(London Orbital, Iain Sinclair)

No cocks crowed and waked. Rather commotion in the corridor. Downstairs the breakfast was laid out in rectangular steel bins. Baked beans, scrambled eggs, bacon, and sausage, lined up to grab; an industrial toast machine on the end conveyered cheap sliced white - coffee squeezers, plain round white plates, cutlery in grey plastic compartments, beside. All included in the price of the room, complimentary. Different people from the night before sat dotted about under ceiling tiles and spotlights; some gorped at the news rolling across the bottom of the giant screen. The plate fitted a decent amount of food on it if you piled it high, as most did. Outside it was still cold, the sun had not yet warmed the air through; breath was visible, and hands were pale bluish and veiny. The unladen bike was still a front the gleaming gym opposite, sheathed in a morning mist that cleared quickly, and was gone altogether beyond the industrial estate. Edward was waiting in the narrow side street; Jefferies Passage. We took the difficult uphill route out of town together. Much like a night in a Travelodge, Edward had often fared as well as
he had the previous night at a smaller cost, and worse at a larger. Mounting the Hog’s Back, involved crossing the a3, which cuts south at a greater rate, and would take Edward home to Steep before the morning was out. On the day in question though, Edward intended to make Farnham for breakfast. A mile out of Guildford and on the back of land was a vineyard, sloping down, trellised from the now dual carriaged road. Both sides allowed for a sunny disposition, out to abundantly pined distant ridges, still clinging to what mist was left, dimming down the greens and browns; Hindhead, Blackdown, and Olderhill north, the Downs and Thomas Country south. Land slides away, to squares of field, seen through gaps in the fern like stubs of tree, and bare skinny fingers wound by ivy. Most people changed lanes to pass by, allowing for a greater amount of twisting about to see over the edge of the ridge, no wider than the road. A settlement of burger vans squatted on the high point, where the tarmac swilled over. After which we descended the spine to Farnham and the pub named after countryman and writer William Cobbett; bikes rolling of their own free will. Edward looked for a statue of the countryman, hoping not to find one, for so long as Rural Rides is read that is all the resurrection the political reformer needs - never at any point does Edward position In Pursuit of Spring alongside Rural Rides, instead he talks of a most select shelf of country books: Cobbett, White, Bourne, Jefferies, Hudson, and Burroughs. Include Thomas now on that shelf. The imaginary shelf got me thinking, back on the bike, at the Hampshire border: Welcome to Jane Austen Country. Who would be included on the nature writing shelf now? For as long as people have been writing, they have been writing about nature; the shelf must reach further than six or seven men. What of New Nature Writing for instance, with its specific, ambitious, and possibly revolutionary manifesto, stating: the way people write about nature needs to change, as our conceptions and experiences of nature change - citing economic migration, overpopulation, and climate change, as transformers of the natural world into something unfamiliar. Nature writing is not supposed to be about bearded men with boots and a stick anymore, walking out into the wild; nor is work meant to be written in the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer. Writers are to be on a journey of discovery, creating voice-driven narrative, told in the first-person, and present in the story; if only bashfully. Their work an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue. I had ridden almost to Chawton - a village well aware of the fact that
Jane Austen had once dwelt there - and the turn off for Selbourne and Gilbert White, before working out the volumes on the new lengthened shelf. Those associated with New Nature Writing: Robert MacFarlane, Richard Mabey, Kathleen Jamie, Tim Robinson, Roger Deakin, and Jonathan Raban. And those less so: Iain Sinclair, Will Self, J.G Ballard, Bill Bryson, Raymond Williams, and W.G Sebald. Would be on there; having subverted the nature writing, travel writing, tradition, to varying extents, creating somewhat of a renaissance in the genre of narrating a form of the self, moving through landscapes Edward knew of well, now radically different - weaving sticky streams of consciousness, stitching themselves to the fabric of the land. Edward was to become the lynchpin, encouraging the elongation of the shelf, just a few short years after publishing In Pursuit of Spring. Edward: the covert modernist, pastoral poet.

Beyond Chawton and the Jane Austen House Museum: the Shrave continued to be wide and flat, manufactured to make motion extraordinarily easy, bike zooming along the cycle path, me, but disembodied - as if driving a truck through the mélange of monocultures; hedge bound arable crop. Just though, a cyclist on the highway south-west, travelling at a lovely sedate speed; thoughts migrating to dark places from the past, thanks to the smooth tarmac. And loss, personal at this juncture, struck a chord again, on this one long love letter, and ambulatory homage. A constant white line to follow aside the trough and crash barrier, only road kill and the odd junction to swerve for - this was the direct train to Coleridge Country, stopping at stations marked remembering, forgetting nothing of love, pain. Motorists looked perplexed at my choice of a stopping point; the hard shoulder rather than a quaint village, such as Four Marks, Ropley, or Chawton. Stopping specifically on an embankment, under aspens illuminated with bright sunshine, amid plastic of all shapes, shiny aluminum and tin, and soggy pulp stuff that was once hard cardboard - all in stasis except when nudged by the drag of a lorry. Recyclables stuck in a prickly hedge, thrown there from cars that could carry them far away. I had stopped for a discarded book, seen amongst the everyday synthetic foliage of, in a greedy age, rubbish; cans, bottles, burger cartons. It was open and falling apart; the spine struggling to prevent the pages blowing across the even landscape; a sad sight, another bit of road kill. The pages left were fused together, the text binding and burning itself across from sheet to sheet,
paper to tarmac, wind and rain reshaping the story. Soiled and webbed; *The Shelters of Stone* by Jean M. Auel, mutated into a solid shelter for a spider, which hung there from a single silk strand, swaying side to side when cars passed by. I left the book there on the curb for the insects, as if it was a burger box, rather than a piece of historical fiction. A ripped raincoat, a white blouse, a shoe, a cassette, and other trinkets once loved were held in a cold, thorny embrace also, and could have been the found objects used by a postmodern artist, interested in form not utility. I carried on perplexed, until I could get off the numbingly even a31, looking out eagerly for the next bridge. The flyover where *Vaughan had died yesterday in his last car crash* came into view. The sexual possibilities of the world around detached in a mess of blood, semen, and engine coolant, advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography, sex and paranoia. *To die by your side would be such a heavenly way to die* played on a loop, the speakers hidden in the central reservation. I had to get off the road quickly. Reverie had struck with the cold hard shaft of memory. The place we were headed. Winchester. I had been there once before. Where was the blue vein of m3?

Edward was already off in the villages somewhere, noting their shape; Holybourne was a parallelogram. An old lady quietly tended her flowers there. Edward sat by her side scribbling down what they were; daffodils and primroses, arranged in jam jars. In Alresford, Edward looked again in vain for something that bore the name of a poet: George Wither this time - who praised the pond there. At the Church of St Mary the Virgin, a stained glass window in the south transept, commemorates the lives of George Wither and Henry Perin. It is of undecided age, so Edward could have missed it, and in the process the author of *Paralellogrammaton*. Beside the pond, the first few lines of the poem, transcribed in full by Edward, were mumbled; eyes shooting from words to water. *For pleasant was the pool, and near it then Was neither rotten marsh nor boggy fen. It was not overgrown with boist’rous sedge, Nor grew there rudely along the edge A bending willow nor a prickly bush, Nor broad-leaf’d flag, nor reed, nor knotty rush; But here, well order’d, was a grove with bowers: There grassy plots set round about with flowers.* It was the first poetry reading completed in-place of the ride. The uniting reaffirmed a sense of purpose within to question the practice. Completing this particular commemorative
service though, felt like giving something back to landscape - an offering of words from a poet whom we can connect with a district of England and often cannot sunder from it without harm. In direct critique of certain literary societies, Edward went on to say something important about reading poetry in-place, with specific reference to Wither. Many other poets are known to have resided for a long or a short time in certain places; but of these a great many did not obviously owe much to their surroundings, and some of those that did, like Wordsworth, possessed a creative power which made it unnecessary that the reader should see the places, whatever the railway companies may say. Wordsworth at his best is rarely a local poet, and his earth is an insubstantial fairy place. But if you know the pond at Alresford before this poem, you add a secondary but very real charm to Wither; while if you read the poem first, you are charmed, if at all, partly because you see that the pond exists, and you taste something of the human experience and affection which must precede the mention. He ended his appraisal of literary tourism with a disappointed; to have met the poet’s name here would have been to furbish the charm a little. Edward, like Wither, would go on to become a poet who furbishes the charm of a specific village. The poems he created were local. They undoubtedly add to the moment of being there. But more importantly they take away, disrupting the landscape. The leitmotifs of homelessness and absence haunt his earth: a shifting, fleeting, spectral place. The poems transport you elsewhere, as you initially taste something of the place as it was, and are then left with a set of images of a dark place prone to collapse. Edward again seems to occupy a middle ground. His is a joyful melancholia - at least on the page - that does more than mourn a wilderness gone, or the loss of countryside practices. He is not a transcendentalist parochial pastoral poet of place and belonging - who is? - despite what is often thought. His work does something odd and clever geographically. It is conscious of the distance between self and surroundings, of dislocation and unsettledness, something to which we can relate in a shifting mobile world - leading to a state of destitution for Edward. As a set of poems they demonstrate the problem with compartmentalizing poets without wandering through the landscape of their lives. It seems obvious to say different poems do different things to landscape and that not all strive to encourage a sense of belonging, or place, amongst wild nature. But Edward and his poems have been misread as doing exactly that. I wonder how many other poets are misread in
the same way. Who is to say that poetry does when placed back in to landscape does what the poet intends it to also? Poems resonate in strange ways.

Post Wither reading. A river tunneled beneath the road. A vale of meadows slid by: the Valley of Itchen. Itchen Stoke and Itchen Abbas. The light was becoming sharp, crisp, grey, and northern, providing scant relief. Cycling through the almost too perfect villages re-minded the last Fellowship birthday loop, only a few days prior, and the poem Old Man, poets in the land; the temporary, transient, performance of poetry by the self installed stewards, guardians, custodians, of all poems and places, birds, hills and trees, Edward Thomas. The birthday spent bounding Steep; looping the bounds and in the process, the extent of his life, beating the bounds of the village, and mimicking the old ritual, drawing a border around what is definitely Edward and what is in all likelihood, not. His was a life that far outstrips the bit of landscape bounded through ritual walking whilst singing the plants into being - as if they need the help of Edward simply to be. The voicings, chanting, at landmarks, the poetic interventions, the brief, spur of the moment performances, engender ownership. But cloud the spur, of the moment, the poetic, ironically. Old Man was nearby, in a garden close by, the smell distinctive, travelled to the nostrils and transported me elsewhere - this is the case when all poems are remembered randomly. Poetry naturally shifts perception away from the moment. This time thinking of Old Man shifted me to the garden where the famous bush was, and the place where the poem was conceived. Thinking of the poem out-of-place sent me to the place, while reading the poem in-place - the place about which it was written - sent me elsewhere. It is impossible to suppress this affective response. And attempt to view the place only as it was through the eyes of Edward, pre-poem. To view the romantic spectacle: a utopia, pre-industrialization, an old world, lost. Reading Old Man in-place furbished the charm a little certainly, but at what cost to the meaning of the poem, its words of childhood, and fickle memory. To be transported elsewhere when reading a poem in-place is not odd at all, it is completely normal; an expected consequence of the practice. It happened when reading Wither. As such, the myth of crumpling time, attempted, was dispelled for good by the pond at Alresford. Even a more permanent offering of words could not crumple from then on, the length of the route west. Seeing the name of a poet and to
reading poetry on-site, as Edward noted, furbished the charm of a place, a little. It became clear words could furbish more than charm though, cycling through Hampshire: Jane Austen Country. The power of representation is known to the *Fellowship*. It can protect a landscape. Protect it from development and perceived change; faces that do not fit, houses that do not fit, accents that do not fit. Present day poets know this - or at least they admit to knowing it protects the birds, the trees, and the hills; the ecology. Some have inserted their words into a landscape, in a similar fashion to the toil of the *Fellowship*. Most notably *concrete poet* Ian Hamilton Finlay, most transiently Thomas A. Clark tying words to trees and stones. Edward knew of the protective qualities of the words he wrote. And Wither for that matter. They did not call it literary ecology though. And they understood the impossibility of keeping a place exactly as it was. The perfect village, a utopia, an English utopia, a southern, middle to upper class, utopia, was understood to Edward as exactly that, a utopian dream. Whether it is understood to the members of literary societies is another question altogether. Members who can invoke climate change now to aid their argument: displacing the real, everyday politics of class, race, and gender. Sending words back to their homeland, adds value to a landscape, and house prices - words that Edward wanted to be considered as for the working class after reading Nietzsche and Marx, and innately homeless, maintain a village: the village becoming a poem in-itself.

The sky was worryingly dim. In quick succession by went the m3 and the a34. A teacher on her way back from school was pushing the bike hard and rocking side to side. I followed, keeping up just about through arable land; dropping down through a council estate, a park, and a university, until parting at Winchester High Street. High society, cathedral, and grammar school. Exactly as was remembered. From a solitary evening a few years prior spent in a cheap restaurant. The geography of love - thoughts inundated with memories of the food eaten, almost tasting it. On passing the place more flooded back - the table cloth, dress, toilets and waitress but nothing of the conversation. It was closed: forever perhaps. It needed refurbishing. But it was good otherwise. Or so I thought struggling to shut out memories. Edward appeared on cue on foot through a crowd, heading uphill towards the barracks. Dismounting and pushing was the only way to reach the summit with all the weight on the bike; Winchester cityscape in view on
turning back, blocking half the sun. Like in an old book the weather changed on digging up the
ghosts of place. Heat was no longer palpable. The wind seemed encouraged. It was getting
moist too but not yet raining. As if a storm was coming. Edward reached the summit and sped
off. It was the last I saw of him until Dunbridge. Thoughts returned to the immediate problem:
how to get to the guest house in the pitch black. Traffic was heavy and the road narrow, with
little space for a cyclist. I concentrated hard on not killing myself. The gentle slopes were just
about visible, crossed with slightly darker hedgerows. Everything was in grayscale. Colours
removed of their vibrancy. Things looked wrong. Not being used to seeing the countryside by
night. The vista curtailed, shut down. It was to get worse. Oak trees enclosed the road and
prevented any remaining light from hitting the ground. Without a light pointing ahead, and with
no street lamps, the only way of knowing whether the front wheel was headed for the curb were
car headlights coming up from behind. The high visibility reflective sash and flashing red light
at least allowed them to see me. Cars coming towards blinded. It was rush hour. And people
were heading home to Romsey; a constant stream. Cold sweat had set, and my face and hands
were stinging from the constant blat of air. To make things worse, the air was damp under the
trees, and the road slippery. A van driver shouted fucking idiot out of his window, as he swerved
to avoid me. Nobody was using the road except the blackbirds and robins a century ago, while
primroses glimmered in the dank shadow of the trees. Once out from beneath the oak, the moon
and stars were all that were left to light the way. Luckily street lamps started again. Despite
knowing the way, I asked a pedestrian, looking for reassurance. They
had never heard of
Dunbridge. But Romsey was dead ahead. That was too far though. The destination was a right
turn before the town centre. The map became my eyes - signs were unreadable, the landscape
invisible, residents useless. Alma Road. The name was repeated over and over, pedal by pedal.
From then on I had no eyes. I had to imagine which way to go. Lanes were largely unsigned and
entirely unlit with no reflective lines to halve. And they were sunken; field, everything, hidden
by hedgerow. A maze of them expanded off the main road. If I got disorientated I would have
been lost for good, no signal, with only the odd house for company. Knowing which way the
lane would bend next meant following the silhouette of hedgerow against the marginally paler
sky. It was deadly silent, soaring downhill in the darkness, locking the back brake and skidding
regularly. This was wanderlust. Like Wordsworth in the Alps. It was dangerous. Fear made the eyes strain to see, the ears prick up, the muscles tense, adrenaline flow. Everything smelt refreshed after an earlier shower. An owl called into the night, a short single call that fell on deaf ears. The world so dark and no one for miles: the last man. Sapped of all energy, cycling became too much. A couple of times I almost fell off light headed. Villages came and went. All of which looked the same in the intense Byronic Darkness. The world was void, The populous and the powerful was a lump, Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless, A lump of death - a chaos of hard clay. The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still, And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths; Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea, And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd They slept on the abyss without a surge The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave, The moon, their mistress, had expired before; The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air, And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need Of aid from them - She was the Universe. The same darkness prevailed and descended over Edward. A deep darkness, one that haunts round And, when a lamp goes, without sound At a swifter bound Than the swiftest hound, Arrives, and all else is drowned... near, Yet far, - and fear... In that sage company drear. How weak and little is the light, A ll the universe of sight, Love and delight, Before the might, If you love it not, of night. Edward Thomas and his world gone forever - he died at war a few days later. Distant window lamps cheerfully twinkled and rain fell steadily, wetting my vision. With a huge sigh of relief, at food and a bed, I coasted exhausted to the pub door. Edward boarded a train to Salisbury, from the tiny station opposite. There were no rooms left at the pub, what with it being Easter. I was the only guest. Edward saw the other man again in Salisbury and attempted to engage him in a conversation about clay pipes. The other man preferred to talk of the things he had seen on the road. He reminded Edward of what he was engaged in forgetting. A weather-vane at Albury and a score of other places he had forgotten. Recycling is a process of remembering and forgetting. Edward and his world are not gone altogether. The past is not. Another drink and I won’t miss her.
Preston, August 2011
‘Much has been written of travel, far less of the road. Writers have treated the road as a passive means to an end, and honoured it most when it has been an obstacle; they leave the impression that a road is a connection between two points which only exists when the traveller is upon it... Yet to a nomadic people the road was as important as anything upon it. The earliest roads wandered like rivers through the land, having, like rivers, one necessity, to keep in motion... We could not attribute more life to them if we had moving roads with platforms on the sidewalks’

(The Icknield Way, Edward Thomas)

‘The Road... We are slow to feel its influence... We take it so much for granted that its original meaning escapes us... For the mass The Road is silent... But it was the most imperative and the first of our necessities. It is older than building and than wells... The animals still have it today; they seek their food and drinking places, and as I believe, their assemblies, by known tracks which they have made’

(The Old Road, Hilaire Belloc)

After a walk down memory lane, to where she would have been, sleep with a dream - she took me out to our meeting place by the sea and got me laden with gin. It has been too late for a long time but still I hold her close in the back of my mind. And I slowly disappear, becoming a ghost. There was a painting of a thistle on the wall separating two single beds. The room was bare otherwise. Breakfast was a lonely affair with a solitary table set. Sat mumbling, half singing, if I forget her I will have no one to forget; I guess that’s what assholes get. Edward alighted and headed over ready to pick up the road he had lost. I too was ready to get back on the road again, tracking Edward towards the signposted Lockerley and East Tytherley, with the
tarmac glinting wet from the night before reflecting back a pale scarcely blue sky; forgetting whilst riding hastily the abbey at Mottisfont - the lane would bear me to a village green and a shop with a striped awning before the realisation dawned. Great swells of oak broke the surface of arable squeezed between railway and lane. I had gone the wrong way again, chosen the wrong road; the one less travelled. There were hardly any houses, bar the odd huge one, explaining the empty pub where I dreamt. It was a weekend pub for local celebrities - Chris Tarrant and Jim Davidson regularly argued there before stumbling home down the narrow crisscrossing carless lanes. We crossed the railway for the first time, arcing past two churches and kissing a river before coming back over the line a mile further down. No trains passed while I circled. Edward did not stop for the villages. The other man did - the weather-vane shaped like a fox still blew over one. Beyond: a chain of nondescript huts spaced evenly were reached by an access road not taken. Behind: the constant ridge was spiked by antenna, parallel, until the lane turned away toward the railway and a timber yard, where I stopped - the chain had fallen off, by dead trunks, trunks of trees, stacked in scalable triangles, bound by barbed wire, waiting to be smoothed of abnormalities, the trees and me. While dust came to rest in a neat pyramid under a giant plane and yellow machines dropped perfect planks. Two industrial blenders out back gargled continuously while a saw whirred intermittently. Down and under the railway, only a train could compete with the din, until rolling languidly aside the river bank for long enough, to a village; with a bridge wide enough to hold a single track lane, a large windowed symmetrical pub with tarmac car park waning down to reeds, and a few unpeopled benches and daffodils underneath weeping willow. It was not a case of following a map or signpost any longer. I took the narrow lanes in vaguely the right direction towards the plain, weaving about but keeping the wall of hill alongside. Mostly the network of lanes provided views across bright sunny arable land. Occasionally there were cows and sheep and verdant grass and deer abundant swarming opposite. The lanes were hospitable. There were no humans driving by ready to mow down; they remained unusually unseen, hidden but for traces, leaving me uneasy. The lanes were also level and open, almost entirely treeless; anticipating the Plain. A small ridge of grass or a clipped box hedge normally flanked me directly. Only one stretch was overhung, moments before leaving the lanes and thick with all different types of tree. The ground still snowed up
with leaves drained of colour, washed throughout winter. Silver birch and oak were the most abundant, refusing to complement each other. The brown oak slashed starkly by the grey birch, until the woodland ended and a main road flashed unexpectedly beneath and the edge of Salisbury - all hidden from lane view.

The River Avon meandered past a sewage works and cradled the cathedral. While the road and railway headed for the cathedral directly before being diverted at the gates. Road, river, and railway met again on the opposite side of the city. We continued as the crow flies. Passing an estate of grey superstores where the city began in earnest with a suburban fringe. After which we were sent off course. Back to meet the river and the bridge out of town, leaving us with no choice but to negotiate the busy High Street. In the shadow of the cathedral I popped up on to an empty strip of pavement to rest and weaved painfully slowly around a line of parked cars. Gazing up sporadically at the spire like a regular tourist still rolling just. Edward did the same dodging a prancing spotted calf and some black and white pigs. Prior to merging again further down where some pedestrians window shopped. Not yet confident in traffic after riding lanes all
morning. We were met by Sidney Herbert and Henry Fawcett - their statues only, in a *city of the dead and birds*, and presumably dead birds - a bust of Richard Jefferies, and out of nowhere a police officer. *Can you pull over please?* As if I was in a car. Unhappy with the manoeuvre off the bit of narrow hectic road and on to the vacant paving slabs. He revealed the damage that I could do to the reputation of cyclists the world over. Apparently he was a keen cyclist. The cars far outnumbered the people I told him. To which he did not respond. Rather he continued the lecture, telling me not to do it again, before getting back in his massive car and blocking the road ahead. Tempting me to nip up the curb again, checking his rear view mirror, until the lights changed and he sped off. In the same month there were 33 burglaries, 2 robberies, 33 incidents of vehicle crime, 31 of violent crime, 311 of anti-social behaviour, and 212 other crimes in Salisbury. It is lucky there was nobody on the pavement. I would have probably done all of those things to them. Not content with being a bit subversive anymore, cycling *In Pursuit of Spring* a century late. I began to break the law more regularly - riding on the pavement for an extended period, post-lecture. Meeting, outside the city, the same road we came in on, and taking it for a stretch; grim after the quiet solitude of the lanes. The elms that lined both sides had gone but the rooks still cawed, riding, the solitary never walked pavement for miles, through a landscape that had not changed too much. It was the road that had. And it became acceptable to ride on the pavement of it. The river and the railway continued on unchanged - the Wylye snaking about on the left, the railway cutting through above to the right. All three converged just after the Avenue, as we turned and headed north towards the edge of the Plain, passing the Bell Inn with Edward behind for a change. The Wylye was crossed at Stoford by an old stone bridge that held West Street - five arches, the central one slightly larger, in pale grey stone. The river bumped into the road and the railway a few more times before all exited left. And we rode north not via the aptly named Over Street - Edward catching all the time.

The day changed again in the vale at Stapleford. A tributary of the Wylye, the Winterbourne cut a thin channel, and flowed about the comparatively narrow valley. While the tributary road through the village glided down to a church and thatched cottages. The main road soon became a distant memory, sat beside the squat tower and bright white mud walls under telegraph poles.
Travelling upstream with the river dotted with still leafless tree, between us and it churned up pasture. Until Berwick-St-James where the river passed beneath, bestrode by a mill. A dense group of flint newly roofed cottages watched on, and two lambs drank from emaciated rivulet, after what was an unusually dry winter. The village pub tempted at the end of the main street, again flint, with a few tall chimneys of brick and a tiled wall, but half covered in thick foliage and a mossy old slate roof, not thatch as Edward had noted. The last thing seen before exiting the place was, a gray, weedy churchyard far too large for the few big ivy-covered box tombs lying about in it like unclaimed luggage on a railway platform. The tombs marked the edge of the Plain with the Winterbourne less visible having guided us far enough. There appeared no very strict boundary line, encircling the Plain. It may be said to consist of all that mass of downland in South Wiltshire, which is broken only by the valleys of five rivers - the Bourn, the Avon, the Wylye, the Nadder, and the Ebble. Three of these valleys, however, those of the Bourn on the east, and of the Wylye and the Nadder on the south, have railways in them as well as rivers. The railways are more serious interruptions to the character of the Plain, and whether or not they must be regarded as the boundaries of a reduced Plain, certainly the core of the Plain excludes them... Within this reduced space of fifteen by twenty miles the Plain is nothing but the Plain. This reduced Plain, nothing but Plain, was still a way off yet. At Winterbourne Stoke, the Winterbourne gave up the ghost altogether: the highway to the sun crosses our path, the landmark of Stonehenge can just about be made out in the distance, and James sat eating in a Little Chef, in mourning, heads home to Exeter alone - the sign for which sparkles in the low sun streaks, Honiton and Exeter left, London and Andover right - while Edward passes an earlier version of himself that had set out from near the first ever roundabout, walking the Icknield Way. Maybe this was the middle, the mid-point of the journey, In Pursuit of Spring, with the high-point about to come shortly - the centre of the semi-mythical South-Country, and the Heart of England - standing at the oldest cross-roads in England, perhaps history, the crossing of the Harroway and the Icknield Way. This was the centre of the psyche, all roads lead to the Plain, encircled with ancient monuments, Landmarks - the centre of history, civilisation in Britain. The singular being a poet searched for, their voice, could be found there. The animals knew it, using the raised ancient trackways to reach it from the continent. Cheddar Man would
likely have walked by on route to his violent death at Cheddar Gorge, following the red deer, wandering extensive birch and alder forests in a Mesolithic hunter-gatherer tribe. The road to Shrewton continued even and empty for a mile - passed only by the odd van driving at excessive speeds. It rose steadily initially before flattening out with no verge at all: the grass began at the edge of the tarmac, and a new barbed wire fence kept any roaming animals from death. A vast sky, spotted with evenly spaced pillows of cloud dwarfed the land bubbling slightly but soon declining. We had not yet reached the Plain that is nothing but Plain - there were still blobs of beech and lattice work hedging dissecting colours from bright yellow to dark brown. Not much further along though the fields merged and greened, eventually fading to a pale dusty version of meadow, where the grassland touched the endless grey blue. And the Plain assumes the character by which it is best known, that of a sublime, inhospitable, wilderness. It makes us feel the age of the earth, the greatness of time, space, and nature; the littleness of man even in an aeroplane, the fact that earth does not belong to man, but man to earth. William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, Ella Noyes, W.H. Hudson, John Aubrey, and A.G. Street wrote such of the Plain. Drayton called it the first of the Plains. It is perhaps best associated though with Arcadia by Phillip Sidney. There is an old bawdy English folk song written about it too. All mention the scale of the vista - the metaphor of meaninglessness - and lack any trace of melancholy; instead celebrating it as the sublime wilderness. More recently the Beatles used it as a backdrop.

The only road rising to the top of the chalk plateau was dry and pitted, dusty mud and shit rolled across it set hard by the sun. It contained elements of solitude, the Plain that was nothing but Plain. Although in the main, it was the undercurrent of violence and death that was most palpable, along with a stream of references to city life, deconstructing the myth of it being a wilderness - it depends on the definition of wilderness. From the roadside, beside mutilated pheasants and rabbits, forced to ride over them by a constant rush of drivers, it was no great wilderness. Add to that a gathering of shopping trolleys, a pile of hub caps, black bin bags sadly caught on barbed wire, plastic shopping bags in a prickly hedge, and the usual cans, bottles, and food waste. While giant pigs waited for slaughter, under oversized baked bean cans, as we climbed the tough stretch to Tilshead with inches to spare. Grazing pasture and hay-cutting
dominated beyond the churned up earth of pig land - not exactly a holiday camp. There was also some arable to feed the troops. The first sight of which came at a fast food trailer: a tank. A helmeted head peered out and ordered a burger and coke, as if at a drive-through. Before parking up and waiting for the guy to fry and then to climb up on the track and pass it in through the sun roof. Photographing a moving tank is an odd thing. Add to that the catering van and you have yourself a surreal photograph. This is what the Plain was all about; juxtapositions. Edward came to realise this despite a Romantic initial summation - his poetry in the making was born less from a separate mythical natural earth. Contrails streak the clear afternoon sky, following the distant fold of the land: seemingly the curve of the earth - even in an aeroplane, the fact that earth does not belong to man, but man to earth. Old, new, war, peace, structure, agency, nature, culture, person, thing, place, space, country, city, wilderness, farmland, sublime, mundane: none pure - Edgelands. What was it Billy Bragg sang of the Plain? After all this it won't be the same Messing around on Salisbury Plain... I hate this flat land, there's no cover for sons and fathers and brothers and lovers I can take the killing, I can take the slaughter But I don't talk to Sun reporters. I never thought that I would be Fighting fascists in the Southern Sea I saw one today and in his hand Was a weapon that was made in Birmingham... I wish Kipling and the Captain were here To record our pursuits for posterity Me and the Corporal out on a spree Damned from here to eternity. It was death that Edward saw too straddling a stream drain as we continued over the Plain past the central village, Tilshead. As for the military camps, nothing may be seen of them for days beyond the white tents gleaming in the sun like sheep or clouds. When they are out of sight the tumuli and ancient earthworks that abound bring to mind more forcibly than anywhere else the fact that, as the poet says, the dead are more numerous than the living. Before descending off the Plain completely, a promenade of trees - elms lining both sides of the road in mourning.

At West Lavington we turned to trace the foot of the Plain. And rode via Little Cheverell, Erlestone, Tinhead, and Edington. The Plain visible between villages on the left. At Erlestone was a tiny front garden, raised above the road slightly, full to the brim of bright plastic and painted pottery - animals, humans, and mythical creatures mingling. It was the sort of cheerful
tat that needed to be shoved together and displayed in close proximity - a single gnome is sinister. And be viewed as a public service. Or a little intervention that breaks with conventional aesthetic guidelines. Other gardens in the village were pruned, neat, boring. It stuck out like a sore thumb, cheering as we dropped down further and swept under the Plain, until we were beneath a steep ridge that carried a railway. *It was the grandest, cliffiest part of the Plain wall, the bastioned angle where it bends round southward.* We kept it alongside, with the tips of Trowbridge and the darker Mendips the horizon. It was a mostly bare stepped scarp, marked with the White Horse, and ploughed nearer bike level; a greener vale sank between. We ended the day as we began it, zigzagging down lanes, following old white arrowed signposts. And could not fail take the correct lane. But we still wanted to travel all - to ride off into the sunset and never come back. Edward would never come back soon enough. His poems and his poetic quests were roads to France. All proceed dialectically. They counterpose war and peace, death and life, presence and absence. Sharing an affinity with the grand arcades project Walter Benjamin undertook but was similarly unable to complete. His was a negative dialectics, or perhaps more appropriately for a poet, a negative phenomenology in the ilk of W.G Sebald, Walter Benjamin himself, and Franz Kafka. It is this aesthetic of failure that underwrites his poems and makes them compelling to read - the failure ultimately of the poet to intertwine, to bridge the chasm of self and world, and revelling in the Derridean impossible possibility. Cycling these lanes and roads honed his poetry. And like the lanes his poems crisscrossed. England is never the same from one poem to the next - in a poem such as *Rain* the same crisscrossing happens in a single verse - decentring the subject, the nation state, and the human in nature. It was March 1913 when Edward rode west. In October 1913 he met Robert Frost. Frost urged him to turn his description of this journey into poetry, without changing its tone in the slightest. Their friendship helped with his depression and self doubt. Frost concluding *In Pursuit of Spring* was poetic; prose poetry of the highest order. Edward did what Frost suggested, writing verse that was not constrained by form or rhyme. They wrote alone but walked together many times in Gloucestershire. These talks-walking sketching out their shared aim - poetry should mimic speech. Frost called this *cadence*. It was a different road to their contemporaries. Frost went to New Hampshire, Edward to France; their signpost moment. I
shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference. I read the sign. Which way shall I go? A voice says: You would not have doubted so At twenty. Another voice gentle with scorn Says: At twenty you wished you had never been born. One hazel lost a leaf of gold From a tuft at the tip, when the first voice told The other he wished to know what 'twould be To be sixty by this same post. You shall see, He laughed - and I had to join his laughter - You shall see; but either before or after, Whatever happens, it must befall. A mouthful of earth to remedy all Regrets and wishes shall be freely given; And if there be a flaw in that heaven Twill be freedom to wish, and your wish may be To be here or anywhere talking to me, No matter what the weather, on earth, At any age between death and birth, - To see what day or night can be, The sun and the frost, the land and the sea, Summer, Winter, Autumn, Spring, - With a poor man of any sort, down to a king. Standing upright out in the air Wondering where he shall journey, O where?

We arrived in Steeple Ashton after travelling the wide flat lanes for about an hour. The old pub there made from the fifteenth century timber and red brick was showing the rugby. A church towered behind white cottages of the same period. It looked like rain. From the village Edward took the road to Trowbridge - its twenty chimneys were as tranquil as its tall spire, and slaughter-house as silent as the adjacent church, where the poet Crabbe, once vicar, is commemorated by tablet, informing the world that he rose by his abilities. I chose not to join him and Crabbe and continued on to Bradford-on-Avon down Cock Hill - a steep decline to town blocked by a broken down car, which wanted no assistance. Off the byways again and on the arterial routes I ploughed a lone furrow, against a tide of motors. Edward loved roads. Roads go on While we forget, and are Forgotten as a star That shoots and is gone. On this earth 'tis sure We men have not made Anything that doth fade So soon, so long endure: The hill road wet with rain In the sun would not gleam Like a winding stream If we trod it not again. They are lonely While we sleep, lonelier For lack of the traveller Who is now a dream only. From dawn’s twilight And all the clouds like sheep On the mountains of sleep They wind into the night. The next turn may reveal Heaven: upon the crest The close pine clump, at rest And black, may Hell
conceal. Often footsore, never Yet of the road I weary, Though long and steep and dreary, As it winds on forever. Helen of the roads, The mountain ways of Wales And the Mabinogion tales Is one of the true gods, Abiding in the trees, The threes and fours so wise, The larger companies, That by the roadside be, And beneath the rafter Else uninhabited Excepting by the dead; And it is her laughter At morn and night I hear When the thrush cock sings Bright irrelevant things, And when the chanticleer Calls back to their own night Troops that make loneliness With their light footsteps’ press, As Helen’s own are light. Now all roads lead to France And heavy is the tread Of the living; but the dead Returning lightly dance: Whatever the road may bring To me or take from me, They keep me company With their pattering, Crowding the solitude Of the loops over the downs, Hushing the roar of towns And their brief multitude.

The road taken extended over the Avon, the town sat on it and extended upwards behind the twinkling lights reflected in the water. A mill rose out of the depths and was being updated to house a museum. Before taking the bridge arching into town some teenage lads shouted and gestured to me out of a car window - fucking wanker - and threw an empty bottle. The car had scattered a group of other boys. Look out cried one and as the thing passed by turned to the next boy with; there’s a fine motor, worth more than you are, cost a lot of money. Is this not the awakening of England? At least, it is truth. I spotted the guest house on the opposite bank. One pink foxy boy laughed in my face as if there had been iron bars or a wall of plate glass dividing us; another waited till I had started, to hail me, long legs.
Preston, August 2011
Three Wessex Poets

‘It was in the chapters of ‘Far from the Madding Crowd’... that I first ventured to adopt the word ‘Wessex’ from the pages of early English history, and give it a fictitious significance as the existing name of the district once included in that extinct kingdom. The series of novels I projected being mainly of the kind called local, they seemed to require a territorial definition of some sort to lend unity to their scene. Finding that the area of a single county did not afford a canvas large enough for this purpose, and that there were objections to an invented name, I disinterred the old one... Since then the appellation which I had thought to reserve to the horizons and landscapes of a partly real, partly dream-country, has become more and more popular as a practical provincial definition; and the dream-country has, by degrees, solidified into a utilitarian region which people can go to, take a house in, and write to the papers from. But I ask all good and idealistic readers to forget this, and to refuse steadfastly to believe that there are any inhabitants of a Victorian Wessex outside these volumes in which their lives and conversations were detailed... Moreover, the village called Weatherbury, wherein the scenes of the present story of the series are for the most part laid, would perhaps be hardly discernable by the explorer, without help, in any existing place nowadays.’

(Preface: Far from the Madding Crowd, Thomas Hardy)

‘It is precisely because the landscape makes its impact upon me and produces feelings in me, because it reaches me in my uniquely individual being, because it is my own view of the landscape, that I enjoy possession of the landscape itself... The world is the field of our experience... I am a field, an experience... Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself... I touch myself only by escaping from myself.’

(Phenomenology of Perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty)
The lead on the kettle was too short to reach the plug socket, in the cramped room, with a bed as a floor and a window as a headboard: the same dimensions as the hostel in Budva - visions of which flooded back; soon we were climbing up to the fort above Kotor. It was necessary to leave immediately. Not before spotting a drawing on the wall. New College, Oxford, the plain castle like tower and central lawn. She must be somewhere there now. A sad painting of the sea with donkeys in the foreground hung by the hastily shut door, glimpsing as it slammed the stars and stripes, fluttering beyond the window pane. It got me thinking of the American poet Robert Frost again and his friendship with Edward. With his encouragement, Edward had written poem after poem - taking only a day to compose many of them. The experiences distilled down occurred on his many poetic pursuits, not just the one in pursuit of spring. He trawled back through published topographical work and the abused notebooks. His varied excursions explored all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in time and space, deterritorializing, re-inscribing and re-inventing place. Frost and Edward began to trace lines in landscape together. Outside, roads spread organically from a single one bridging the Avon. It was pretty simple to navigate around town on foot. Beams of light shone at greenish grey stone: Abbey Mill, the last new cloth mill in Bradford was built by Richard Gane of Trowbridge in 1875 on an earlier mill site and closed in 1902. It was occupied in 1914-1918 by the Royal Cycling Corps and Australian Forces, acquired by Spencer Moulton, then Avon Rubber in 1956 producing springs for road and rail vehicles, later as offices until 1995, and developed as retirement apartments in 1997. A black plaque marked. The Royal Cycling Corps bit was intriguing. Edward was a keen cyclist - painfully obvious when attempting to trace his tyre tracks. A reverie of Edward cycling in to battle arose from the recesses. And I began thinking of war and the decision Edward had to make. Ending up at a walk Edward took just after the outbreak of war; a walk that turned out to be life changing. It was taken with fellow nomad Robert Frost, one fateful afternoon in late November 1914. They were walking in Little Iddens, the village where Frost lived. I had been told the tale many times by the Fellowship. It was repeated recently by Matthew Hollis in a newspaper article. Thomas and Frost were strolling in the woods behind Frost's cottage when they were intercepted by the local gamekeeper, who challenged their presence and told the men bluntly to clear out. As a resident, Frost believed he was entitled to roam wherever he wished,
and he told the keeper as much. The keeper was unimpressed and some sharp words were exchanged, and when the poets emerged on to the road they were challenged once more. Tempers flared and the keeper called Frost, a damned cottager, before raising his shotgun at the two men. Incensed, Frost was on the verge of striking the man, but hesitated when he saw Thomas back off. Heated words continued to be had, with the adversaries goading each other before then finally parting, the poets talking heatedly of the incident as they walked. Thomas said that the keeper's aggression was unacceptable and that something should be done about it. Frost's ire peaked as he listened to Thomas: something would indeed be done and done right now, and if Thomas wanted to follow him he could see it being done. The men turned back, Frost angrily, Thomas hesitantly, but the gamekeeper was no longer on the road. His temper wild, Frost insisted on tracking the man down, which they did, to a small cottage at the edge of a coppice. Frost beat on the door, and left the startled keeper in no doubt as to what would befall him were he ever to threaten him again or bar access to the preserve. Frost repeated his warning for good measure, turned on his heels and prepared to leave. What happened next would be a defining moment in Frost and Thomas's friendship, and would plague Thomas to his dying days. The keeper, recovering his wits, reached above the door for his shotgun and came outside, this time heading straight for Thomas who, until the n, had not been his primary target. The gun was raised again; instinctively Thomas backed off once more, and the gamekeeper forced the men off his property and back on to the path, where they retreated under the keeper's watchful aim. Frost contented himself with the thought that he had given a good account of himself; but not Thomas, who wished that his mettle had not been tested in the presence of his friend. He felt sure that he had shown himself to be cowardly and suspected Frost of thinking the same. Not once but twice had he failed to hold his ground, while his friend had no difficulty standing his. His courage had been found wanting, at a time when friends such as Rupert Brooke had found it in themselves to face genuine danger overseas. Frost said later that it was this event that made Edward go to war. Then there came the poem; The Road Not Taken - the last and pivotal moment in a sequence of events that had brought him to an irreversible decision. Edward read the poem and soon after enlisted. He felt that fighting for English soil,
may enable him to look again composedly at the English landscape. He was certain that he had chosen correctly.

Edward was sat on his bed at a farm beyond Trowbridge thinking of three Wessex Poets: Stephen Duck, William Barnes, and Thomas Hardy. He had not yet met Robert Frost of course. Meanwhile in Bradford-on-Avon, a flag and a black plaque had put me in mind of two Dymock Poets. It was not a new occurrence. The friendship between Edward and Robert Frost was something that had bothered for months. It was a pivotal meeting for Edward that is for certain. And for Frost who was a struggling poet before he met the influential critic. And they became good friends almost immediately. I slipped in to memory. A walk was remembered, taken in their footprints - I resolved to go again once the pursuit was over with, if it ever could be: there was a nagging doubt that too much is read in to the friendship, and that more attention could be paid to the poetic pursuits and topographical renderings that shaped his being, his voice. A long haired cool cat was present on the walk with the *Friends of the Dymock Poets* - it kept me company. Some of the people waiting on the gravel at the base of May Hill looked familiar. Either because the people who attended such events were the same: or because they were actually the same people. The place was easy to reach by car - the m50 separated it from Dymock a few miles off. And as it turned out many of the people were the same - the same old faces from the *Edward Thomas Fellowship*. Similarly when looping sites with *The Richard Jefferies Society, The Thomas Hardy Society*, and *The Ivor Gurney Society*: the same faces popped up. The amount of people walking in such a way is miniscule - following in the traces of old poets and writers. Most people walk with poets without realising. Despite this they get themselves heard. It was odd not to be looping Steep with the disciples. Instead we were mapping a friendship - tracing their route to, around, up, and over the hill - ignoring the fact that Edward died soon after walking this way. The blister of land provided a means of orientation. We walked up a public bridleway initially before beginning the ascent, stopping to talk, like Edward and Frost, at a gate or stile. A Gloucestershire man brought a map of the area and regaled stories - walk-about theatre. While a relation of Lascelles Abercrombie recited a poem. It was mention of Rupert Brooke though which brought about most discussion. The rivalry
between Brooke and Edward particularly - it could have been this distant influence that drove him to war. It was only though when I thought back to ascending the hill: there is something significant in scaling a surface - reaching the top and looking out, engendering within some form of ownership over a landscape; all is visible and as such internalised a little. Edward looked out across his home of England and his ancestral Wales - the majestic Severn snaking away between. Two poets looking out into the distance: they began to think of far-off places, to discuss war and the trenches. It was 1914 when Robert Frost and Edward Thomas ascended May Hill. *Mountain Interval* lay still closed on the table. A drink arrived snapping me back to the dark pub. The second hand book fell open to a familiar page; *The Road Not Taken*.

Before Edward decided that sleep was better than any book, some bad poetry he was reading had put him in mind of Wessex poet, Stephen Duck. Back in the small bedroom the drawing of New College, Oxford became a drawing of a castle in Christminster - the most north-easterly point of the fictional Wessex, created by Thomas Hardy. Unlike Essex and Sussex, Wessex has become nothing more than a semi-mythical region; *a merely realistic dream country* - adopted and given a *fictitious significance* thanks to novels and poetry. Unlike a nonsensical wonderland, or a fantasy middle-earth, there is a delicate mythopoeia at play, which mimics place as it is generally understood, almost entirely - the mapping of the fictional Wessex adding credence to the creation. Writing place and region in this way alters remembrance practices - preserving a semi-mythical region is a step too far even for literary societies. Thomas Hardy did not want to draw up boundaries and have people yearn for a reinvented Wessex - although by bringing an old region back to life he returned it to the collective consciousness once more. Creating your own world which resurrects existing mythology, furbishes the charm of place in a different way to that of most poets. Site-reading, detective-work, and memory-loops, are of an alternate order, as if the poetry and prose are in a parallel universe just but crucially, *clearly* out of grasp - returning to a Victorian Wessex pre-industrialisation is difficult because it was *merely a realistic dream-country*; a literary mapping. The Wessex novels differ from most topographical books of the region that the fictional Wessex covers for this reason - see the essays of John Llewelyn Powys about Somerset and Dorset, or *Portrait of the Quantocks* by
Vincent Waite, *Alfoxden Journal* by Dorothy Wordsworth, and *Lorna Doone* by R.D. Blackmore all from Outer Wessex, *Ridgeway Country* by H.M. Timperley, *The Story of My Heart* by Richard Jefferies and *Where The Bright Waters Meet* by Harry Plunkett Greene from Mid Wessex, *Nature in Downland* and *Hampshire Days* by W.H. Hudson and *The South Country* by Edward Thomas mainly set in Upper Wessex, *Freedom of the Parish* by Geoffrey Grigson Off Wessex, or the animal narrative of *Tarka the Otter* by Henry Williamson and *A Black Fox Running* by Brian Carter and the river narrative of *Dart* by Alice Oswald placed in Lower Wessex, along with *Lifting the Latch* by Sheila Stewart and finally most similar in style to the Wessex novels *Lark Rise to Candleford* by Flora Thompson both from North Wessex, all are set in distinct geographical regions, recognisable today. Alongside a mythical world comes a mythical self. And the poet or writer can find a form of truth impossible elsewhere. The region of Wessex returned to the map and the novels of Thomas Hardy, ground-breaking, changed the perception of rape and the rights of women. Edward revisited the semi-mythical south-country for a different reason: storytelling, folklore, tales, and mythology. Turning over, away from the drawing, sleep became better than any book: *dream-country* - revealing the mysteries of the deepest reaches of my psyche; a door to the unconscious, with a Freudian slip of fireplaces and staircases.
Preston, September 2011
The Avon, Biss, and Frome

‘At hawthorn-time in Wiltshire travelling
In search of something chance would never bring,
An old man’s face, by life and weather cut
And coloured, - rough, brown, sweet as any nut,
A land face, sea-blue-eyed, - hung in my mind
When I had left him many a mile behind.
All he said was: 'Nobody can't stop 'ee. It's
A footpath, right enough. You see those bits
Of mounds - that’s where they opened up the barrows
Sixty years since, while I was scaring sparrows.
They thought as there was something to find there,
But couldn't find it, by digging, anywhere.'

(Lob, Edward Thomas)

‘Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read,
accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an
enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body.’

(The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau)

A loop on this lengthy poetic pursuit, a circle line, only a direct line previously: awoke by the
steady stream of cars beneath the old window, Edward by a thrush singing in a lilac next to his.
Kettle began babbling on the floor directly beside the socket, flag fluttering outside in the wind
and rain - it was going to be an odd day, having got used to biking miles towards the eventual
destination: instead of following a rough route, for a change, it made more sense to actually go and find stuff in the neighbourhood. Avoiding eye-contact with Oxford, tea was drunk staring at the stars and stripes, photographing it obsessively. And the nation, and belonging nowhere attuned itself. Downstairs a Russian lady served me full English with Danish bacon. Drinks from all over the world sat upturned behind the marble bar - it was a bar not a pub. Round about the old dead mills, Edward began to complain about cycling. It is inferior to walking in this weather, because in cycling chiefly ample views are to be seen, and the mist conceals them. You travel too quickly to notice many small things; you see nothing save the troops of elms on the verge of invisibility. Whole places are blurred together - perhaps most boundaries were pretty blurred. We walked, pushing our bikes alongside, just in case walking became tiresome. Edward saw every primrose, and celandine and dandelion, every silvered green leaf of honeysuckle, every patch of brightest moss, every luminous drop on a small tip. These little instances were important. He saw the wonder in oft ignored things, questioning descriptive writing that does not: scale is remembered - his poems do not abstract generally; they are a story of something witnessed or borrowed local stories. We were still in the suburbs. Edward planned to write a book on the suburbs. Along with In Pursuit of Spring; The South Country, The Last Sheath, and The Heart of England either began in The Unofficial Countryside, the suburbs, or had a suburban chapter - an early attempt to write Edgelands. We were finally beyond commuting distance, well beyond Hampshire, over the other side of the Plain. And out of the gigantic burb, the belt, with Bristol and Bath nearby, pulling in people. That did not stop Edward thinking of the city though. He could not escape the suburbs. Neither could I. And again all is Edgelands. The crowd that I dislike the most is the crowd near Clapham Junction on a Saturday afternoon. Though born and bred a Clapham Junction man, I have become indifferently so... It is a crowd of considerable size, consisting of women shopping, of young men and women promenading, mostly apart, though not blind to one another, and of men returning from offices. They take things fairly easily, even these last, and can look about... It is a disintegrated crowd, rather suspicious and shy perhaps, where few know, or could guess much about, the others. When I find myself amongst them, I am more confused and uneasy than in any other crowd... Here, at Clapham Junction, each one asks a separate question. In a quarter of an hour I am bewildered...
and dejected... How different it is from a London crowd. In London everybody is a Londoner. Once in the Strand or Oxford Street I am as much at home as anyone. If I were to walk up and down continuously for a week I should not be noticed any more than I am now... There are no lookers on: all are lookers on. I look hard at every one as at pictures in a gallery, and no offence is taken. I can lose myself comfortably amongst them, and wake up again only when I find myself alone. Each day, except in the shops, an entirely new set of faces is seen, so far as memory tells me. A burly flower-girl, a white-haired youth, and a broken down, long-haired actor or poet, are the only strangers in London I have seen more than once. Yet the combination is familiar. I am a Londoner, and I am at home. But I am not a Clapham Junction man any more than I am a Trowbridge man.

Inside a fourteenth century tithe barn and looking up: a cross shaped hole in pale stone focused the sun, concentrating light in the narrow long space, and arched wooden beams soared with cathedral like pitch above nonexistent tithes. It was monumentally quiet. A little breeze rubbed at the central gate and knocked a circular handle. All so empty belying the original use: the storage of all sorts of goods. And all so still: any people lifting and carrying for the church long dead. Higgledy-piggledy roof tiles were spotted with plates of lichen. Beyond worn slate, a view back to the Victorian era, a market town, and its lifeless mills. Between the two a river came by, with canal, railway, road, and another river parallel. Not since Manchester has there been a view ahead that layered time such; the natal industrial north looked not dissimilar. In fact towns from then on had a distinctly northern feel about them: Shepton Mallet and Bridgwater could have been Stockport and Burnley had signs been swapped about. It seemed like a good plan to follow the industrial lines out of Bradford-on-Avon. Specifically a towpath, where cycling was prohibited without a permit: wandering first across a two foot wide footbridge, to the middle of the railway and standing between lines. I looked both ways into the distance down dead straight rails, before reaching an elevated canal side. Colourful canal barges were a welcome adjustment, garish for colour blind eyes: everything had appeared greyed in town. Barges would have still carried goods not housed humans, just about, when Edward walked along by, aiming for the confluence of the Frome and the Avon. A solitary rope swing swung, and back down the
way a low bridge with three small pointed arches, crossed the river for ages since. Twenty or so barges cheered the stagnant water before the canal turned sharply. Thick trees no longer flanked.

An aqueduct bridged: the Avon and railway sharing a valley thirty or forty feet below. The canal had been squeezed in above both and retained, before crossing, solidly channelled by the town stone greened from flash floods. It continued along the opposite river bank, meeting Avoncliff beside a blue train. A weir rumbled and foamed beneath, as did a cowering water mill powering nothing, left in rack and ruin - a corrugated iron structure ready to drop off the side, into the fast flowing water and out to sea; cagouled man, hat, and dog, watching on.

Off the towpath, sharply down to the riverbank. Into a soggy field too wet to ride - a flood plain. Grass long enough to constitute meadow, the odd wig of dry tough hay. There two rivers converged: the Frome and the Avon. It was possible to walk out into the middle of the confluence almost, down a pointed spit of land, and to stand before a wavy line of water extending out under the railway. Strangely the strip of water looked still. While all around it cascaded. Staying still for a while appealed, over the Frome was a pub with three pointed attic windows, painted in a classic mint green, called simply; *The Inn at Freshford*. There was a barn attached, its flight of stone steps with cast iron hand rail provided a neat bicycle stand. Immediately inside was a bar, to the left at the far end an open fire, and on the right a man doing some paperwork. In front of the fire sat four people, two couples. At the bar with his back to the door, another man nursing a pint, while the bar maid swilled used glasses. It was a shallow room, the back wall a few feet in front of the entrance - extending widthways like a football stand far from the door either side, to make up for it. A sign for a microbrewery caught the eye, owned by the pub, and brewed in a place called Rode Hill. Having ridden many hills that week a pint of the stuff might help. I sat at the bar and asked for a pint in a generic northern accent. And was instantly asked a few questions both by the bar maid and the regular nursing a half empty pint. *What brings you down ere?* They were intrigued by a pursuit in the wake of a poet. The local helped to pin point a few things I was unsure of in the landscape, chatting away about the village and the market town, drawing on a napkin a good route to take if I wanted to see all three rivers. He seemed as integral to the structure of the pub as the great wooden beams. The
elderly couples could be overheard touting grandchildren studying at Bath University. Clicking the bar maid over with the bill. The Wiltshire man ordered another pint. And we talked some more about the Frome valley. He was the sort of country-man Edward wrote of as having an enviable closeness to the land. The first person to ask me what I was doing, four days in to a solitary cycle, was enviably jolly.

Outside, it took a while to unlock the bike, taking it slowly as there was no real rush. You still ere? A familiar voice, stumbling off, two sheets to the wind, smiling and waving, said. I’m off now was shouted over a shoulder, while struggling up the steep hill to Iford, happier for the kindliness. It was a case of following the napkin around the two valleys walk. The first landmark drawn on the crude but easily understandable map was an old spring. A couple of dirty rags tied to the arched railings behind it further demarcated. The grey brown strips of fabric marked the high point of the lane, along with a church. Before it drifted right and descended down through the Frome valley, to the pleasure of myself and Edward - who had no doubts that he had done well to cycle rather than walk. It was as easy as riding in a cart, and more satisfying to a restless man. At the same time I was a great deal nearer to being a disembodied spirit than I can often be. I was not at all tired, so far as I knew. No people or thoughts embarrassed me. I fed through the senses directly, but very temperately, through the eyes chiefly, and was happier than is explicable or seems reasonable. This pleasure of my disembodied spirit (so to call it) was an inhuman and diffused one, such as may be attained by whatever dregs of this our life survive after death. Feelings mimicked those of Edward. The world round about seemed more apparent than usual; senses distributed and mingled with the trees zooming by. Thoughts of elsewhere flew by the wayside, as the river flowed hither and thither alongside. Wind whipped up and a new sun played with the old puddles. We were born to an enchanting little spot; to a stone soldier guarding over the river, stood always on the centre of a little bridge, in battle dress. Marked on the tissue as Iford Manor, there three roads and a river bond. And a medieval house with Georgian facade sits idyllically at the foot of the steep sided valley, beneath hanging woodland and a stepped terraced garden. The vale had been occupied since Roman times - and it had an Italian air to it, round about the great estate. On the
road side, sculptures drew the eye forth - positioned just so to gaze beyond and on to rural land and back in to the topiary garden. Sunlight had basked the scene in an artificial light. So much so it all appeared like a stage; shadows cast. All ready to fall in on itself: the utopian vision. Look too hard and like the warrior turn to stone - a statue since the wool factory shut, resigning the canal alongside it. When the warrior awakes, the spell breaks, the countryside burns, and the grazing purebred cattle cook early. Up Iford Hill, the Westbury White Horse is visible; a mark in the land. The local man lumbers back in to the scene, negotiating the riverbank. Like Lob of the Edward Thomas poem, or the old man of the Dart traced by Alice Oswald. What I love is one foot in front of another. South-south-west and down the contours. I go slipping between Black Ridge and White Horse Hill into a bowl of the moor where echoes can’t get out

listen
a
lark
spinning
around
one
note
splitting
and
mending
it
and I find you in the reeds, a trickle coming out of a bark, a foal of a river

The Frome continues beneath still visible and within earshot - the river’s mutterings audible

you can hear water
cooped up in moss and moving
slowly uphill through lean-to trees
where every day the sun gets twisted and shut

with the weak sound of the wind

rubbing one indolent twig upon another

Tales from the riverbank to a sleep walk on the Severn, all this spirit of place - and on to the

Biss through Trowbridge, with its myth and conjecture, and local knowledge; was there a

Fellowship of the waterscape biked? The Severn would be upon me soon and seals

With their grandmother mouths, with their dog-soft eyes, asking

who's this moving in the dark? Me.

This is me, anonymous, water's soliloquy,

all names, all voices, Slip-Shape, this is Proteus,

whoever that is, the shepherd of the seals,

driving my many selves from cave to cave . . .

Sat there, who should come up and stare at the chapel on the bridge and its weather-vane of a

gilded perch, but the Other Man.
Preston, September 2011
‘He muttered, pushing his bicycle back uphill, past the goats by the ruin, and up the steps between walls that were lovely with humid moneywort, and saxifrage like filigree, and ivy-leaved toadflax. Apparently the effort loosed his tongue. He rambled on and on about himself, his past, his writing, his digestion; his main point being that he did not like writing. He had been attempting the impossible task of reducing undigested notes about all sorts of details to a grammatical, continuous narrative. He abused notebooks violently. He said that they blinded him to nearly everything that would not go into the form of notes; or, at any rate, he could never afterwards reproduce the great effects of Nature and fill in the interstices merely - which was all they were good for - from the notes. The notes - often of things which he would have otherwise forgotten - had to fill the whole canvas. Whereas, if he had taken none, then only the important, what he truly cared for, would have survived in his memory, arranged not perhaps as they were in Nature, but at least according to the tendencies of his own spirit.’

(In Pursuit of Spring, Edward Thomas)

‘The strategy that, yesterday, aimed at a development of new urban spaces has been little by little transformed into a rehabilitation of national heritage. After having considered the city in the future, does one begin to consider it in the past, like a space for journeys in itself, a deepening of its histories? A city henceforth haunted by its strangeness - Paris - rather than taken to extremes to reduce the present to nothing more than scraps from which a future escapes - New York.’

(The Practice of Everyday Life: Volume 2, Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard)

It was a day of the week, one of them; all track of time lost. Every Monday morning comes; back to the banal, the weekday, not yet though, there was still a fair way to go. Finally we were
to leave; get back on the road. Edward rode down to Bradford; the southern one, on the Avon, with jackdaws. He dismounted by the river, directly beneath the stars and stripes flopped under the misted window. And gazed up at the town: the church, brewery, stepped streets, yews, chestnuts, willows, almond, beech, rooks, a factory, smoke. The Other Man joined him; they both went to Wells. I was unsure which one to follow. There were memories in Bath nearby. And Avebury: a sarsen stone taken from there to make the fake grave at Steep. Both are world heritage sites. But the other two went south together with the Frome, passing by a castle on a brow. Down a lane of poplars they continued. Edward had stayed in a farm there for the past two nights. Taking a slight detour by it, I found myself at the Somerset border. The plain stone almost windowless building marking the county line: the only abode for miles. Edward wanted to go one way the Other Man another. Edward to Rode Hill, the Other Man to Tellisford. Both retraced their steps to Farleigh, Edward becoming increasingly frustrated with the Other Man. I opted to go uphill past a settlement of holiday caravans, as the Other Man had suggested. It was a heavily treed rising lane, but a metal five bar gate offered a glimpse of the valley. Tellisford climbed on the opposite bank; a few cottages, a hamlet in the Yorkshire Dales. The lane dropped down to the Frome rapidly, becoming a narrow mudded path. Footprints dried hard in the weak winter sun prevented cycling. On reaching the riverside, it was clear why lane became path. There was no longer a ford rather a footbridge, pannier width. Along with the little bridge the Other Man had described a ruined flock-mill, an ancient house also a ruin, a farm with a round tower embodied on its front, and a beautiful meadow sloping between the river and the woods above - best possible place for running in the sun after bathing whilst listening to nightingales and thrush. All were still there but not as they appeared to the Other Man. It had all been tidied up and regenerated on an industrial scale. The ruined ancient house had been reworked by stonemasons. It even had its own modern steel footbridge hidden behind a weeping willow. Most surprising of all though was the flock-mill; a residual bricolage, a water-mill converted to hydroelectric generation gleaming with crisp slate and steel appendages. A glass box hung from the side of the building and over the river - its banks recently carpeted in pristine lush green lawn. Pulling the bike up the cobbled steps reminded me of the north again, a stylised, sterile north; specifically a bread advert. There was no war memorial by the church at
the top. It was a thankful village, having lost no men. A simulacrum of a village: no death drive - the ideal place for the Other Man to reside, with the absence of a body.

It made perfect sense then that the next sight of interest for the Other Man would be *The George Inn*. Edward stopped a mile prior and sat on a sheep trough. The Other Man did the same, shelling monkey-nuts; monkey-nuts, like beef-steak, *turned into himself* - they absorbed his attention and he talked comparatively little. Edward gazed southward to Cley Hill; a dim, broad landscape that *seemed to be expecting to bring something forth*. A pile of tyres rested jumbled with the shells of monkey-nuts, beside a lane used rarely by anything other than tractors. The Other Man continued to shell. Sticky wet mud painted itself upon the pile of tyres, the ones at the base almost completely clay coloured. All were thrown into roughly the right area; some overhung the lane, thick with cloying muck. None were large enough to fit a tractor, at the makeshift tip; rubber resting, tyres buckling, hedgerow collapsing. After the shelling was complete, Edward cycled to the village. We passed a plastic heron, doing its job. The Other Man got off to look over the George at Norton St Phillip - *another show place, known to its proprietor as the oldest licensed house in England*. A plaque stated that it was once occupied for a night by the Duke of Monmouth, leader of the Pitchfork Rebellion. He was attacked there by forces loyal to James II. The rebels got as far as Trowbridge but royalist forces cut off the route and Monmouth turned back towards Somerset through Shepton Mallet, and Wells, eventually being defeated at the Battle of Sedgemoor, near Bridgwater. The Inn is an imposing structure, looming over the road, dwarfing the pub opposite; the *Fleur De Lys*. It had been kept in good order, clearly repainted regularly in a bright white, with signs added to each entrance; coach room for example, all in keeping with the age and style of the building - stone base with arched leaded windows, beneath a timber frame. The Other Man was scared out of entering the inn by a new arrival - *a man of magnificent voice, who talked with authority, and without permission and without intermission, to any one whom neighbourhood made a listener. After a wish that the talker might become dumb, or he himself deaf*, Edward and the Other Man escaped, and retreated with the rebels towards Wells, via Shepton Mallet, leaving the heritage sight to the cult which surround the site - the members of the public who undertake pilgrimages.
there, and like in the case of Edward; life is reduced to his death. It has always baffled: why is so much emphasis placed on trying to understand the reason Edward went to war, rather than going back to his texts? During his childhood, Edward acquired a knowledge of Natural History, collecting butterflies and birds’ eggs, and noting details of trees and flowers. These early notes led to published articles at the age of seventeen! The Woodland Life, his first book was published soon after, in 1897. His work though is eclipsed and taken by the trenches; people gorp at the spectacle of war and forget the enduring power of his writing. It seems this is symptomatic of the way heritage and preservation works; it needs death - in the words of Michel de Certeau; the misappropriation of subjects accompanies the renovation of objects. The writings of Edward at each of the heritage sites on route indicate an intense annoyance with them. The packaged, commodified, and cleaned up, the trendy spot to photograph the horizon; they are places for the Other Man who stares at the surface of things. Edward cannot escape them though: the Wanderer, the Ancient Monument, and the Picturesque Scene - surviving Romantic archetypes. Why end the pursuit near Coleridge Cottage then? As a provocation, the Other Man essentially becomes the reader; enfolded with a tourist gaze? There is evidence of subversion at these sites, on the part of Edward - adding the wrong ghosts, doing the wrong things, seeing the wrong stuff, missing things altogether; Stonehenge is left alone despite its proximity. The book becomes, in this unfolding, an early critique of heritage tourism, the grand tour, and the guide book - something which his pursuit of spring could never be described as; time spent writing of clay pipes, talking of paintings in his room, and generally procrastinating and being poetic, is testament to this.

Like Edward and the Other Man, stopping for the church behind the inn was not an option, as the land dropped smoothly away and rose steadily beyond. We continued pedalling, carrying momentum. At the peak of the rise was a remote outpost called Tuckers-Grave, appropriated by ramblers and cyclists, and back in the sixties by mods and rockers. Who Tucker was, and whether it was a man or a woman buried at the crossing, I did not discover. The pub is one of only nine in the whole country without a bar or kitchen; it has since shut after two hundred years of service. The name comes from the burial place of a suicide, Edwin Tucker, who died in
1747. Edward’s is a strange, defective form of historical materialism: he enjoys leaving the gaps for others to fill - the type of storytelling loved by anthropologist Michael Taussig; synonymous with Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, and W.G Sebald. Exactly what happens to the site without the name of the pub adorning it remains to be seen; forced to close, with no new owners forthcoming. The pub, like most other pubs, had died already but carried on regardless for a decade or two. Fifty-two pubs close each week in the United Kingdom: the landlord, a dying breed, kept it going as a service to the as yet undead, the dead on their feet, repeating routines; a pint of cider and a read of the paper, a game of dominoes or skittles - like the ghostly characters in *How the Dead Live* by Will Self. Remembrance is a messy business. *The Stranglers* played at the pub for its last ever day of service. A final farewell barbeque, a ritual sacrifice of meat, and the doors closed for good - another legendary Somerset cider house gone. It is a nice thought though that despite the church down the road not acknowledging the death, the people of the villages of Faulkland and Norton-St-Phillip remembered Tucker for over two centuries; and the site of his death, and gave him a grave. Beyond the grave on the cross-roads was more death: Faulkland - the name of the village and the place itself seemed to encourage it - peering out across the Mendips; it was not the affluent pristine stockbroker sort of village passed earlier in the journey. A plastic reindeer, left over from Christmas, summed the place up. Everything was a bit greyer, open to the elements, windswept, cold. It was a lonely, isolated, sad stretch of road, topping high land, with the Frome on the left and Midford Brook on the right, through the mist. *Far more ancient and dark since they killed the badger there* - one after the other, each in different poses, for intrepid journeyers; a flash of the first out of the corner of my eye, stopped me in my tracks. The amount of rubbish there was unbelievable, accrued over decades by the hedgerow - wrappers for things that no longer existed. Amongst all that shit beside the road, were no less than four badgers, in quick succession. They had popped their heads up and hoped for the best, stretching their short legs; only to be needlessly killed by speeding drivers, off down the shops to buy more tat. The first had its fur torn off, leaving a sack of bloody insides. Its face was still intact; the eyes looking upwards at anyone who passed by. None of the body was flat. It must have been caught by a car and dragged, unpeeling the skin as the body rolled and scraped. The second a hundred metres farther on was not on the road but in the hedgerow. It
was amongst the rubbish that lazy, greedy, selfish twats could not be bothered to take home with them - a lot bigger than the first, although it was hard to tell as the lower half of the body was missing. Again it was not flat in any way. Maybe it dragged itself there to die, groaned and gave up; little forearms splayed, long head down. The third had a blackened face, flattened to the tarmac. The rest of its body protruded from the flat point like Glastonbury Tor, or the artificial chalk mound, Silbury Hill. And finally, the last sad specimen was sat upright, and had in all likelihood curled up before it was hit hard by the stiff bumper, rendering it, hopefully, instantly stiff too. *The most ancient Briton of English beasts.* A whole clan - boar, sow, and cub - gone in a matter of weeks; judging by the amount of soft tissue left. It was a moment of poetic clarity on an otherwise mainly care free jaunt. I scribbled this soon after, in the absence of any graves, not that anything as naive and childlike could do the horrific scene any justice. Their bodies were there but nothing marked the spot for posterity; human remains are often not beneath a memorial, but the spot is still marked for future generations. The sarsen stone above Steep for example, changing a hillside in to Edward Thomas’ Hillside; recognising his life spent walking up and down it, dedicating the ridge to his memory. His bones in Agny, France, near the battlefield of the Battle of Arras, are visited rarely by the literary cults on their pilgrimages; the fake grave above Steep being their preferred destination.

*I talk to myself a lot now dead badger,*
* guts spilt out in a pointless red anger,*
* blackened face flattened to the hard tarmac,*
* stupid creatures if only we’d turned back.*

*I passed your friend splayed over the curb,*
* strewn with the rubbish thrown from turds,*
* we did not chat though I turned away,*
* anyway after everything what could I say.*

*Sleep now I will go and leave you in peace;*  
*pity I could not know you as an old badger,*  
*the road continues but we do not as once*  
*I turn this corner I am finally gone yonder.*  
*I talk to myself a lot now dead badger*  
*because you are no longer my badger.*

Beyond the narrow road where cars shot by too fast was a bright blue bird. An electric blue, the type you see in a modern kitchen. It too was too flat. It shone against the dark road surface. And
shared the road with a brown creature, perhaps a weasel or a stoat, it was difficult to tell. A
tower on the opposite side of the valley gained the attention of the Other Man. He asked twenty
questions about it of a carter. Once two hundred and thirty feet high; about a hundred feet still
survives. A long straight uphill stretch left behind the road kill - the foxes, rabbits, squirrels,
rats, and pigeons seen lifeless were neglected to an extent after death alley. Earlier in the week
an incline such as would have pained. There was a new sense of control though, as I knew my
machine and rocked it side to side in a low gear, breathing steadily - it was no longer the
repressive type of signifying machine Kafka had in mind, rather a technology of possibility,
good or bad; like the motor car. The hills seemed a cruel place. Charlton, a village on the edge
of the Mendips - area of outstanding natural beauty - reminded us again of the city we had left
behind days ago. Perhaps shiny city life was not so wicked after all. Although had we ever
really left it behind, all we were doing was extending the city, or more correctly, merely
witnessing the extended city, feeling its grip, its immense pull, closing down local pubs, killing
animals. The Fosse Way appeared arrow straight, heading south-west, on its way to the old
frontier trading city, Exeter - home. Stratton-on-the-Fosse and its fort sat high on the roadside to
the right. A mile farther on we were seven hundred and twenty feet up, almost on a level with the
ridge of the Mendips, now close before us. At Nettlebridge the road twisted back and forth,
meaning a deviation from the old Roman way down the hill, as Edward noted - even so top
speed was still achievable. The opposite ascent was also in an S. The Fosse Way cut a path
towards Cannards Grave - named after Giles Cannard, or Tom Kennard, Tom the Tavener, the
landlord of a hostelry there, a popular post for travellers. Cannard was involved with smuggling,
gambling, illegal drinking, and profanities. Further tales are told about him intoxicating his
guests with the specific aim of robbing them whilst they slept, and even in some cases
murdering them, later claiming that they departed his care in good health. Opposite the inn
stood a gibbet, on which smugglers, highwaymen, bandits, and other miscreants met their end.
Tom’s tavern was popular not only because of its convenient location but because he provided a
bolt-hole and refuge for a number of local scoundrels. It was not uncommon for landlords to
identify guests carrying rich pickings, and then sell information about their travel plans. A few
miles away from the inn, the poor travellers would find themselves robbed, but nobody would
ever be able to prove Tom’s complicity. There are two versions of the Cannard legend. One says that Tom managed to lay his hands on a certain paper, which entitled him to considerable wealth. Frome merchants disputed the transaction, and, along with a band of Sheptonians who had no love for Tom, went en masse to the inn, with the intention of lynching Tom. The terrified Tom escaped, and committed suicide by hanging himself from the nearby gibbet. The second version is more dramatic still. Tom, it seems, was not just a publican in league with thieves: he was himself a highwayman and rustler, in league with the notorious Dr Syn, the Scarecrow of Romney Marsh. Tom's activities took him to Glastonbury, Frome, and Warminster. However, his illicit career came to an end when he was discovered with ten stolen sheep in his yard. Although his supporters alleged that he was framed by his enemies from Frome, he was found guilty and hanged from the gibbet. There is some evidence that Tom was the last man in England to be hanged for sheep-stealing. Since then there have been numerous reports of the place being haunted. Tom's tavern fell into decline, although much of the original structure is to be seen in the restaurant which currently stands on the spot. The gibbet was eventually torn down, and Cannards Grave Inn was built in its place. The pub sits near the Fosse Way - large sections of it now impassable; walked only by the ghost of Tom the Tavener. We took the S - rather than negotiating brambles and spectres - up the northern slope of the Mendips, dropped again, and reached eventually after much effort, the aptly named Long Hill; the long way round and it was another long uphill stretch. It was all pavemented though, so there was less chance of becoming road kill. No pedestrian passed, no cyclist passed; yet there was always a steady stream of cars and lorries to stop and rob.

On the side of a wall was this. The Basilica of St Gregory the Great at Downside, commonly known as Downside Abbey, is a Roman Catholic Benedictine Monastery and the Senior House of the English Benedictine Congregation. It is also a school for children aged nine to eighteen. The community was founded at Douai, Flanders, then in the Spanish Netherlands, in 1605, under the patronage of St Gregory the Great. The founder was St John Roberts, who became the first prior, and established the new community with other English monks who had entered various monasteries in the Spanish Benedictine Congregation, notably that at Valladolid. In
Dom Philip de Caverel, abbot of St Vaast’s Abbey at Arras, built and endowed a monastery for the community. At which point I stopped reading. The word Arras stopped me. And I began to think of Edward again. Of his grave near Arras, of his death - seems we cannot leave death alone, ignored and it pops up again, the death drive. And his life is reduced to his heroic death once more. Of the events leading up to his death, and without visiting the barracks, battlefield, or grave, this is what I have managed to piece together from archives and his private war diary, kept during his last three months as a soldier. The diary was re-printed in the back of the book of collected poems that I carried with me on the poetic journey *In Pursuit of Spring*. And gazed at stood before the abbey at Downside. Peter Sacks wrote this of it. *It is written in a small (3 in. x 5 ¾ in.) Walker’s Back-Loop pocket-book, bound in pig-skin and priced at two-shillings; the cover and pages are curiously creased, which suggests that he was carrying the diary either on the 8th of April, when he was knocked over by the blast from a 5.9 shell, or on the morning of the 9th of April, when he was killed at an Observation Post while directing the fire of 244 Battery during the opening barrage of the Battle of Arras. The diary was given to his son Merfyn, who died in 1965, and it was re-discovered in 1970 by his son, Edward - president of the Edward Thomas Fellowship until he died recently. According to the Western Front Association, after finally deciding to enlist, Edward was passed medically fit in July 1915 and joined the Artists Rifles - the same regiment that Wilfred Owen joined two months later. In three months he became Lance Corporal and was instructing officers at Hare Hall Camp, near Romford, Essex. Wilfred Owen arrived there for training in November. Edward composed over forty poems at Hare Hall, in the ten months he spent there. In August 1916 Edward received his commission in the Royal Garrison Artillery. And on September 20th his unit travelled to the Royal Artillery Barracks at Trowbridge. Edward went to Lydd in Kent for further training. At Christmas time he was given some unexpected leave. January 1st: *Shooting with 15 pounders and then 6” howitzers. All week at Lydd, I being fire control officer or observer daily, with map work for next day at night. Thorburn away. Beautiful clear bright weather always, but sometimes cold*. January 5th: *Left Lydd on mobilisation leave. Night at Rusham Road with Father and Mother. January 6th: Julian to breakfast. With mother to stores. Lunch with Eleanor and tea with Joan and Bertie. Home with Bronwen. All well. January 7th: Walks with Helen and...*
children. Fine day. January 8\textsuperscript{th}: Eleanor came and stayed night. Wrote cheques for next 6 months. January 9\textsuperscript{th}: Eleanor left. Helen and I walked in forest. January 10\textsuperscript{th}: Dentist’s. Lunch with Jone and Harry. Tea with Ivy Ransome and then Ingpen and Davies. Saw V.H. Collins. Home. January 11\textsuperscript{th}: Said goodbye to Helen, Mervyn and Baba. Bronwyn to Rusham Road. Lunched with Mrs. Freeman; afterwards saw Haynes and McCabe. Tea with Jesse and T. Clayton and met Lipchitz. Supper at Rusham Road with all my brothers. Edward had begun the poetic passage \textit{In Pursuit of Spring} from Rusham Road almost four years earlier, having never written a single poem: no plaque adorns the house, unlike 61 Shelgate Road, where he lived as a child, around the corner. He arrived at the mobilisation camp at Codford, Salisbury Plain on January 15\textsuperscript{th} 1917. January 13\textsuperscript{th}: Nothing to do but test compass which never gives same results. Walk and tea with Flawn. Cold drizzle. Horton and the battery left early for Codford. Even wrote verses - his one hundred and forty-fourth poem, his last poem. \textit{The sorrow of true love is a great sorrow And true love parting blackens a bright morrow: Yet almost they equal joys, since their despair Is but hope blinded by its tears, and clear Above the storm the heavens wait to be seen. But greater sorrow from less love has been That can mistake lack of despair for hope And knows not tempest and the perfect scope Of summer, but a frozen drizzle perpetual Of drops that from remorse and pity fall And cannot ever shine in the sun or thaw, Removed eternally from the sun’s law.} On January 28\textsuperscript{th} he wrote to Bronwen, Helen, Ivy, and Eleanor saying that once over there he would say no more goodbyes. January 29\textsuperscript{th}: Up at 5. Very cold. Off at 6.30, men marching in frosty dark to station singing ‘Pack up your troubles in your oldkit-bag’. The rotten song in the still dark brought one tear. No food or tea - Freezing carriage. Southampton at 9.30 and there had to wait till dusk, walking up and down, watching ice-scattered water, gulls and dark wood beyond, or London Scottish playing improvised Rugger, or men dancing to concertina, in a great shed between railway and water. Smith and I got off for lunch after Horton and Capt. Lushington returned from theirs... Hung about till dark - the seagulls as light failed nearly all floated instead of flying - then sailed at 7. Thorburn turned up... the men outside laughing and joking and saying fucking... Remember the entirely serious and decorous writing in urinal whitewash - name, address, unit, and date of sailing. \textit{A tumbling crossing, but rested.} The battery arrived at Le Havre at 4 a.m. \textit{Light of stars and}
windows of tall pale houses and electric arcs on quay. March through bales of cotton in sun to camp. The snow first emptying its castor of finest white. Tents. Mess full of subalterns censoring letters. Breakfast at 9.46 a.m. on arrival. Afternoon in Havre, which Thorburn likes because it is French. Mess unendurably hot and stuffy, tent unendurably cold till I got into my blankets. Slept well in fug. Snow at night. Edward spent his first days overhauling the guns, rearranging stores, and reading sonnets. He wrote to his wife Helen almost daily, and made a speech to the men explaining that they need not be shy about writing familiar letters home. The battery entrained on February 4th and arrived at a frozen Mondicourt without guns on February 6th. On February 9th after a night of heavy firing, Edward and half of the battery were sent to Dainville, where they went into billets on the Arras Road. Edward spent the next weeks at Observation Posts at Ronville and Beaurains. On the 3rd April Edward wrote MACBETH and on the 5th April HAMLET. April 8th: A bright warm Easter day but Achincourt shelled at 12.39 and then at 2.15 so that we all retired to cellar. I had to go over to battery at 3 for a practice barrage, skirting the danger zone, but we were twice interrupted. A 5.9 fell 2 yards from me as I stood by the f/c post. One burst down the back from the office and a piece of dust scratched my neck. No firing from 2-4. Rubin left for a course. The next day, at 7.30 a.m. he was killed by a shell, standing at the Beaurains Observation Post. It was the first day of the Battle of Arras. Killed by the blast of a shell that exploded nearby. Stopping his heart and leaving not a scratch on him. He had just turned thirty-nine. On the last pages of his diary were found these notes: The light of the new moon and every star And no more singing for the bird... I never understood quite what was meant by God The morning chill and clear hurts my skin while it delights my mind. Neuville in early morning with its flat straight crest with trees and houses - the beauty of this silent empty scene of no inhabitants and hid troops, but don’t know why I could have cried but didn’t. Loose inside the diary, strangely creased by the shell-blast, like the diary, was a photograph of Helen. Also in his pocket was a slip of paper with some addresses on it, on the reverse of which was written this: Where any turn may lead to Heaven Or any corner may hide Hell Roads shining like river up hill after rain. It is taken from his poem Roads. Edward was buried in Agny Military Cemetery, near the site of his death. Row C grave 43, by some cherry trees it says; by accident or by design. The cherry trees bend over and are shedding, On the old road where all
that passed are dead, Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding This early May morn when there is none to wed.

A pastoral centre on leaving the abbey: children in their matching dress kicking a football against a wall - a scene from the 1950s but now somehow eerie and strange; the dialectical image, the ride was full of them, the journey itself a dialectical image. Inside the pastoral centre was a dog. It barked and barked. Edward has been described as a pastoral melancholic. The book shop represented nothing of his ideas about humanity and nature. It contained many self help guides and some nicely bound bibles. It was not the pastoral expected. Outside, Shepton was five hundred feet lower, and but two miles distant; so that we glided down somewhat like gods, having for domain an expanse that ended in the mass of Selwood Forest twelve miles to our left, level topped, huge, and dim, under a cloudy sky. The Other Man refused to stay in Shepton Mallet. He was very angry with Shepton. He called it a godless place. Edward laughed, supposing he lamented the lack of Apollo or Dionysus or Aphrodite. The Other Man mounted and rode on towards Wells. We entered the market town from beneath the old Somerset and Dorset Railway. The line is not used anymore but the viaduct still soared sixty feet above - industrial heritage on an epic scale, reminding a northerner of Stockport. We went to find some of the old pubs, before dropping down to the Dust Hole. Unfortunately The George is now a bank, the Bunch of Grapes a pound shop, and the Red Lion a playground. More deceased pubs: holders of memories, community spirit. Down at the Dust Hole, beside the old quarry, the viaduct strides across the valley. No miners frequented the pub, kicking up dust. A German Shepherd and a few people sat dotted about in ones and twos. The dog sniffed away at the bottom of my trousers, skulking like a badger, while I patted its fat head. It was the first contact I had had all week. Edward was at a temperance hotel, thinking of his day. With the aid of maps he travelled his road again, dwelling chiefly with his other self on Tellisford; its white bridge over the Frome, the ruined mill and cottage, the round tower of Vaggs Hill Farm, and the distinct green valley which enclosed them. I dwelt with the badgers, in their tense and contested sites of being, doing and remembering, of disaster and delight; hearing sounds, enacting performances, and partaking in noise, rush and solitude. At the frontier and the fringe, on the
road and in the sett: the marginal, interstitial and oppositional. An affective, embodied encounter - always already mediated - amenable to the agencies of power, knowledge and desire.

Preston, October 2011
I lay awake listening to the rain, and at first it was as pleasant to my ear and my mind as it had long been desired; but before I fell asleep it had become a majestic and finally a terrible thing, instead of a sweet sound and symbol. It was accusing and trying me and passing judgment. Long I lay still under the sentence, listening to the rain, and then at last listening to words which seemed to be spoken by a ghostly double beside me. He was muttering: The all-night rain puts out summer like a torch. In the heavy, black rain falling straight from invisible, dark sky to invisible, dark earth the heat of summer is annihilated, the splendour is dead, the summer is gone. The midnight rain buries it away where it has buried all sound but its own. I am alone in the dark still night, and my ear listens to the rain piping in the gutters and roaring softly in the trees of the world. Even so will the rain fall darkly upon the grass over the grave when my ears can hear it no more... I am weary of everything... I am alone. The truth is that the rain falls for ever and I am melting into it. Black and monotonously sounding is the midnight and solitude of the rain. In a little while or in an age - for it is all one - I shall know the full truth of the words I used to love, I knew not why, in my days of nature, in the days before the rain: ‘Blessed are the dead that the rain rains on.’

(The Icknield Way, Edward Thomas)

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
Remembering again that I shall die
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
For washing me cleaner than I have been
Since I was born into this solitude.
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying tonight or lying still awake
Solitary, listening to the rain,
Either in pain or thus in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead,
Like a cold water among broken reeds,
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
Like me who have no love which this wild rain
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be towards what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

(Rain, Edward Thomas)

Edward tried to get in the churchyard again; but it was locked. Monsoon weather had hit overnight, bringing to mind a piece of nature writing and a poem. Robert MacFarlane, who was also in pursuit of Edward, had heard the very same rain - rain that sluiced down on to long white roads and frail tracks. New nature writer MacFarlane, resembling the poet Andrew Motion drifting ahead of him, was exploring a love-affair with paths. Both reflected on the relationship between paths, stories, poetry and folk-memories - old paths were imagined as ghostly spaces of time-warp and spectres. Edward had criss-crossed the Downs on lengthy pursuits, and walked rough-circles, turning left consistently or right consistently. One of the basic situationist practices, the dérive, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences, could be compared. His loops involved playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical affects - and were quite different from classic notions of a walk or a stroll as a practice. MacFarlane considered how paths might be thought of as sculptures, a kind of democratic art-form. He used Edward as a means to an end. Edward had developed a method of making one-day wanderings in the design of a rough-circle, trusting that, as he put it in The
South Country: by taking a series of turnings to the left or a series to the right, to take much beauty by surprise and to return at last to my starting-point. The rain still rained on, inundating guttering. Hit by wind, it poured down to the tarmac in waves with a slap. Edward returned often to rain - piecing together The Icknield Way in 1911 between Streatley and East Hendred, and writing a poem from a bleak hut in 1916 on the war path, being the darkest two images; recurrent like rain, they returned in Shepton, and resonated as always with each other. It was not until mid morning that the rain ceased to be. And paintings of rough seas could be left for the next guest. Cold, dull, townscape rose up: the home of Babycham, the oldest prison in England still in use, and the wet walled Anglo-Bavarian Brewery, closed in 1921 soon after Edward rode by. A lover of size or of beer at any price might love it, but no one else. The plain stone heap is on the Buildings at Risk Register these days, produced by English Heritage - a local landmark, and the first brewery in England to brew lager. Its tubular chimney stack stood high behind us on exiting the town. No smoke spirals or whirls of dust to wave us off. Rather beech as the river drilled deeper underground. Until on either hand was a vertiginous array of greenery. It blurred into one as the road descended smoothly to the base of the valley. The Sheppey meandered little alongside. Bricked in and straightened it followed the line of the road, swapping sides on occasion. It was a tight steep gorge, everything felt squeezed, fighting for space. Even the sky was pushed out and up, into a narrow ceiling of whitish blue. Trees jostling for attention were scraping the sky. While lorries bustled their way through, on a hectic narrow stretch. Leaves rustled about grassy banks, attempting to be heard over the confusion. Smoky exhausts affected overworked underpaid lungs. The dizzying pressure was palpable. Ordinary practitioners live down below, in the depths of valleys. Making use of a space that cannot be viewed, and visibly understood. Gazing was impossible, rendering a certain strangeness, leaving the eye unable to produce an imaginary totalisation. There were tactics of movement down there, as everything withdrew and moved in a neat flow. All sight of the chimney stack lost in a mass of verticals. Leafy landscape was citified for a few moments, in order to make some sense of overbearing surroundings. As if we braked and rolled through the streets of New York. Streets woven with the common hero, the ordinary man, walking each day to work in regular lines. The Practice of Everyday Life for Michel de Certeau. Massively different from dérives and rough-circles. The
edge of the island was reached and the familiar sky enveloped the scene. We could once again enjoy the horizon ahead of us. We had become accustomed to waiting and doing so.

Stone cottages faced the road and lined it consistently for a way. Scatterings of ivied oak, elms and ash trees interrupted. A ridge positioned itself on the left. The road clung to its side. In the distance was a view of Wells. Its cathedral sat over the other side of the wide flat-bottomed vale, about two thirds of the way up. The Sheppey was lost somewhere below, with plenty of space to meander how it liked. Drifting about, taking random turns this way and that, camouflaged by swells of trees and busy hedgerows. There two other cyclists crossed our path. They stopped a hundred yards ahead and gazed-at the cathedral. The other couple, as we shall call them, re-mounted. We followed closely for a while. They were not proper cyclists, riding slowly down to a sign-posted cycle path, talking away. *Any turn may lead to heaven or any corner may hide hell.* The path was a few feet beneath the flat route to Wells. Above somewhere the major road was hidden by a buffer of sound quelling ash. Ahead was a darkened underpass. Something hung motionless from the centre of its archway. The other couple stopped a few hundred feet before the concrete bunker. As we got nearer what it was did not reveal itself further to us. It looked like a slaughtered pig hanging from its trotters. A little closer it changed again into a mess of arms and legs, a crucifixion of sorts. Until we were dead beneath it on our bicycles, and what it was finally gave up the ghost. A swirling mass of three naked bodies: hips pushed forward, feet and heads tipped backwards. The circle of humans hung to the underpass, and to each other, arm to leg. It was a portal to the underworld, the afterlife. These humans tempted more souls in, or clung on for dear life to this earth, which was unclear. The small of the back stretched to breaking point. That is the only way to see the sculpture properly. Bend backwards and look upwards, mimicking the lost souls. It was a nondescript cycle path, trailed by grassy banks; concrete bounded and crossed from time to time. While ivy clad trees provided a canopy. A liminal sculpture in itself, the back way to Wells: a kind of democratic art-form. While it was not a path on the Downs trodden into existence, or an ancient way - like Robert MacFarlane had envisaged - it had a resilient charm to it. And like the paths winding about urban wastelands, it was every bit as democratic, with or without the sculpture. The other
couple had stopped to eat a picnic. Damp concrete greyed all around them. *Make millionaires history* was daubed numerously. It was a wild place. A faint trace of urine suffused the air.

Edward knowingly laid new tracks on an already marked ancient landscape. Wookey Hole caves were only a few miles away - used by humans for 50,000 years. Yet he thought of one writer at Wells, and that was Mr. W.H. Hudson, who has written of it more than once. Wells is a part of the book; *Adventures among Birds. He says that it is the only city where the green woodpecker is to be heard.* The book is about his journeys in search of birds, predominantly in southern England. Edward regards it as one of his best country books. It is the best book entirely about birds known to him. *No such descriptions of birds’ songs and calls are to be found elsewhere.* Edward said this of Hudson: *if ever, in spite of his practical work, his warnings and indifferent scorn, they should cease to exist, and should leave us to ourselves on a benighted planet, we should have to learn from him what birds were... When he writes of his first and only pet bird and it escapes, there is no pettiness or mere prettiness: it is not on the human scale.* The giant crane, South American crested screamers, a kestrel being turned off by starlings, a heron alighting on the back of another heron, starlings detaching themselves from their flock to join some wild geese. Their playful spirit is universal. It is a writing of the non-human; a more-than-human book, exploring the rich connections between animals, movement, and place. The movement of birds through space and amongst places fosters unique sites. There human-animal relationships are negotiated, complicated, enacted, performed, and contested. While Hudson is not obsessed by writing himself out of the work, there is a sense of it being a book shaped by the birds. *Adventures among Birds* blatantly concerns itself with nature-society, human-animal relations. And is a forerunner to recent works claiming - for ontological and political reasons - to be written from an animal, or non-human, perspective; books considerate of non-human agency in a flat universal relational system. In these books, humans and non-humans participate in a network: there is no hierarchy of humans and non-humans. *His birds are intensely alive in many different ways, and always intensely birdlike.* As Edward says, specifically of *Adventures among Birds; it reveals the author in the presence of birds just as much as birds in the presence, visible or invisible, of the author.* Writing about animals is an age old problem. A flat ontology
does not fix the problem altogether. It provides thinking space. Edward is reminded of the skylark, just as he was by George Meredith of Box Hill. For the skylark is to Hudson both bird and spirit; and one proof of the intense reality of his love is his ease in passing, as he does in several places, out of this world into a mythic, visionary, or very ancient world. His multi-sensory historical materiality reveals how to engage creatively and critically with the poetics and politics of landscape. In Pursuit of Spring unearths likewise.

Beyond Wells was flat land. Glastonbury Tor, distant, protruded from it, topped by a tower. A path visibly snaked up to the summit of the ancient navigational tool. Straight watercourses networked their way about the boggy grass beneath. Elm, willow, and pine followed contiguous. We wound up at the base of the Tor in no time. So flat and easily negotiable was the land. In every direction were apparently empty marshy fields - evidently why the always muddy festival is staged nearby; the pyramid stage, the dance tent, messy days, and messier happier nights came rushing back unwontedly. At Avalon there were apple orchards for the production of scrumpy. This was how I imagined Somerset. The sun had dried the roads through. And maelstroms of dust kicked up into my eyes from the faded tarmac. Above; the Tor stood magnificent in scattered light. Somewhere up there people were looking down at me from their prominent position - mapping the scene in their minds perhaps. I become only a part of the unfolding, something different to them being distant. In his essay on ascending Glastonbury Tor, John Wylie follows Maurice Merleau-Ponty out of the binarism of subject and object, seer and seen - central to Cartesian models of knowing. A deer was hidden from view, crumpled in a thicket, bloodied but whole; another victim of the dense traffic of this motorway corridor. It could not at least be viewed from above, by the spectators on their elevated station. Even the motor vehicles would have likely missed the beast. It was spared becoming a part of the spectacle by the bramble. Thorny stems wound around, enlacing and intertwining the corpse, preserving the dignity of the creature in death. Unlike the sad exposed badgers, with their insides visible as well as their outsides, all inseparable. Edward went to town. The cultural history of Glastonbury is significant. But not due to the streets and buildings of the place, rather
its adjacent fields where people go each summer. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty the world is the field of our experience. I am a field, an experience.

We crossed the River Brue by Pomplares Bridge. In half a mile we were in the town of Street. The boot factory has dominated the place for over a century. A chimney and a squat tower in a past life; it sprawled about with a dullness approaching the sordid. What Alan Berger would have called; drosscape. Phillip Guston; crapola. T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land. Now the factory is a village. An outlet village: retail landfill. Old industrial country lanes are swallowed by the ribbon development. Not on the scale of the Iain Sinclair explored Wellesian Pits; Bluewater, Meadowhall, Metrocentre, and The Trafford Centre. More the deliberately quaint Bicester Village, Cheshire Oaks, and Freeport, which like a mock Tudor house, mimic a twee past. There is less of the Ballardian hypermodernity. They are not the arcades of Paris, a habitat of the flâneur. Rather a few shops down a fake high street. Just hollowed out things; their plastic sheet brick facades hiding corrugated metal. The dialectical image - a place removed of all the extra life it should possess but still somehow the same thing. It is no more than a strange slither of a village. All predicated upon the seconds of capitalism. Cheap tat: broken, jumbled, ripped. We circumvented the no cycling rule, weaving about the cars, attempting to use the site differently. Not purchasing, we were deemed subversive, and were told to leave, along with some kids. Now the situationists have gone there is no fun. There was no epiphany. It was not that sort of drifting. We did not lose ourselves or become something different - see with new eyes. It was impossible to do so in such a village, on only one plain street. Novelty, play, had been sacrificed and replaced by dead ends, meaningless objects. It was just one big car park, mini roundabout after mini roundabout. To use a term that Edward would, soulless. Spectres of Marx hung about. Use value and exchange value cleaved. A downtrodden commodity fetishism, with all of the dirty fetishism removed. It was a world away from the grandeur of the arcades. A self imposed détournement: just bad capitalism. The older shoppers looked desperate - anything would do for school shoes. Moody teens being dragged about - not the make of shoe they were hoping for. It was all very depressing. Not the town centre. Not difficult to park. Not expensive. Not too busy. Not dangerous. But what exactly was it? Where was the spectacle? They define themselves in
negatives, Iain Sinclair inscribes. We were glad to see the flat slowly swelling up at last. To the long ridge of the Polden Hills.

For long stretches it was as Edward had promised; the high point where the road tops the hills. There the sea was visible for the first time; at the other edge of the country, the western edge where the Bristol Channel cuts in - a Kerouacian Epiphany though again it was not, we rode on hoping one was still to come. We passed abandoned petrol stations selling four star. And conglomerations of houses - pavement touching - with their associated waste products. Before the sea became the focal point, Wales very far off, the Mendips before. Only a glimpse was afforded, gone almost as quick as the bridged m5 - the border of holiday country. For soon we had dipped down in to town, a wetting sea whetting the appetite, reaching the level of the railway. The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner apparent then on amongst domes of distant dim Quantocks, tower, spire, and chimneys of Bridgwater. Water, water, every where, And all the boards did shrink; Water, water, every where, Nor any drop to drink. Other poems of the sea were thought of too. Reminiscent of The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner. Some also removed from the logic of sense: beautifully imagined nonsense. A Sea Dirge: Lewis Carroll. There are certain things - as, a spider, a ghost, The income-tax, gout, an umbrella for three - That I hate, but the thing that I hate the most Is a thing they call the Sea. Pour some salt water over the floor - Ugly I'm sure you'll allow it to be: Suppose it extended a mile or more, THAT'S very like the Sea. The nonsensical nonsense poem The Jumblies by Edward Lear - renowned for his literary nonsense - started: They went to sea in a Sieve, they did, In a Sieve they went to sea. And ended: Their heads are green, and their hands are blue, And they went to sea in a Sieve. J.R.R. Tolkien in a poem called Bilbo’s Last Song saw hobbit Bilbo Baggins leaving Middle-earth by sea. Foam is white and waves are grey; beyond the sunset leads my way. Foam is salt, the wind is free; I hear the rising of the Sea... Farewell to Middle-earth at last. I see the Star above my mast! Robert Louis Stevenson documented Christmas at Sea for a sailor. Another poem The Sea and the Hills by Rudyard Kipling with its odd sexual imagery, sexualized feminized nature, and colonialist power came to mind. His Sea as she slackens or thrills? Who hath desired the Sea? - - the immense and contemptuous surges? The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-
stabbing bow-sprit emerges? His Sea as she rages or stills? The liminal space, the seaside, a sexual space: a space literally on the edge of society. Blackpool and Brighton. Magaluf/Shagaluf. We descended further, past The Harp Song of the Dane Woman heard by Rudyard Kipling. Poets continued to come ashore. They imagined far off places when they gazed into the sea. John Masefield via Cargoes and Trade Winds saying; There is the red wine, the nutty Spanish ale, The shuffle of the dancers, the old salt's tale, The squeaking fiddle, and the soughing in the sail Of the steady Trade Winds blowing. Allan Cunningham ending the poem A Wet Sheet and a Flowing Sea with: While the hollow oak our palace is, Our heritage the sea. It was the edge of the nation. Siegfried Sassoon wrote a declaration against the continuation of war. Poets entered the beaches left right and centre. They all though went to fight. Siegfried Sassoon returned to the front line; across the Channel. Matthew Arnold sat on Dover Beach writing of the perilous threshold that the sand is. Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night. National landmarks, the white cliffs of Dover, were invoked - the limit of the chalk seam we had at points traversed. Edward had ended up on the outskirts of Bridgwater, with John Keats and Alfred Lord Tennyson - resident of the Isle of White chalk - for company. They meditated on the sea: its beauty, its materiality, its noises, its smells - affect. The poets were all obsessed by the thing in itself, its phenomena, and sought an originary aesthetics, before society turned the word/world merely visual. They sought it. It keeps eternal whisperings around Desolate shores, and with its mighty swell Gluts twice ten thousand caverns, till the spell Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound. Often 'tis in such gentle temper found That scarcely will the very smallest shell Be moved for days from whence it sometime fell When last the winds of heaven were unbound. Oh ye! whose ears are dinned with uproar rude Or fed too much with cloying melody - Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth, and brood Until ye start, as if the sea nymphs quired! said the romantic Keats to the others.

It is grim up north. Bridgwater was no different. It had an empty port that sat on the River Parret. The place with its clayed clogged drain retained an industrial feel. And like the cotton weaving, coal mining, ship building, and good trading towns of the north it was frayed around
the edges. A little dilapidated since the closures. Bingo, pubs, and takeaways. The nuclear power station on the river bank was the main employer. In the suburbs I got a puncture. The asbestos filled houses there could have lined Burnley, Blackburn or Bridgwater. A poet who drowned himself came by. Writer of *A Northern Suburb*, John Davidson - a poem set in the industrialised north. The last two stanzas go: *For here dwell those who must fulfil Dull tasks in uncongenial spheres, Who toil through dread of coming ill, And not with hope of happier years - The lowly folk who scarcely dare Conceive themselves perhaps misplaced, Whose prize for unremitting care Is only not to be disgraced.* To be downtrodden is miserable enough. Oppression though up north back then was internalised, pathology - a disciplining of the self that Michel Foucault would have recognised. The cycle has not been broken altogether. And is reminiscent still of so many towns in England. Thoughts again returned to the north as I pushed the useless bike town-ward. A lady offered me a lift in her car. She was off to meet her husband at a pub there. I politely refused but was pleased to be asked. The sort of friendliness that places such as, are renowned for. A few poets have written towns. John Betjeman is one, Iain McMillan another. Philip Larkin though was the poet I remembered on my way to the pub. He wished for his poetry to be spoken of down the pub. Like Thomas Hardy, W.H. Auden and W.B. Yeats, his poems were centred upon working folk. Deprivation for him was what daffodils were for William Wordsworth. *Aubade* is an open wound, the life of an alcoholic bachelor. *I work all day, and get half-drunk at night. Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare. In time the curtain-edges will grow light... Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring Intricate rented world begins to rouse. The sky is white as clay, with no sun. Work has to be done. Postmen like doctors go from house to house.* It is not self-indulgent. The poem by the end leads to a realisation. Everyone in town is doing the same old, same old, suburban drudgery - just like everyone at night listens to the rain falling, waiting for the morning sun to break and ruin. One million youth are out of work. And have nothing to get up for. Many would be happy with a daily routine. Poets have to be careful when writing about deprivation. They can proffer a glimpse of the towns of England - more than objects, regeneration, bricks and mortar. Philip Larkin offers a peep; writing starkly the north-east. London still sucks all in. The bright lights: moths to a flame. England is a giant suburb of it.
Consequently towns are shedding numbers. Town planners named an avenue after William Wordsworth, a road and a square after Samuel Taylor Coleridge. We passed by both with their former social housing. The Quantocks faded to the sea beyond. The forgotten town was in the foreground. Intimate and green, despite the shitscape retail. A pillared dome market coaxed forth, salvaging onlookers. *Wetherspoons* reveals all that any town is. Everyone goes there at some point. A statue of Robert Blake stood on the fork ignored. The many televisions were instead seen. All ages pile in for burger and beer. Get out of the rain. The lady who offered me a lift in her car was there. Her husband was not about. We talk of other times in *Wetherspoons*. Fold napkins, push soft chips around a plate. Drink cheap lager, stare beyond thickly gelled heads. That time in Manchester when she was not allowed in. No football shirts. Our thoughts migrate there. Morrissey.

Preston, October 2011
Bridgwater to the Sea

‘Honeysuckle ramped on the banks of the deep worn road in such profusion as I had never before seen. The sky had clouded softly, and the sun warmed misty woods of the coombs, the noise of slender waters threading them, the exuberant young herbage, the pure flowers such as stitchwort and the pink and silver white cuckoo flowers, but above all the abounding honeysuckle, produced an effect of wildness and richness, purity and softness, so vivid that the association of Nether Stowey was hardly needed to summon up Coleridge. The mere imagination of what these banks would be like when the honeysuckle was in flower was enough to suggest the poet. I became fantastic, and said to myself that the honeysuckle was worthy to provide the honeydew for nourishing his genius; even that its magic might have touched that genius to life - which is absurd. And yet magic alone could have led Coleridge to safety through the style of his age... Except for Coleridge, I had the road to myself between Nether Stowey and Holford. Sheep were feeding on some of the slopes... but these eaters of grass... were ghosts by comparison... the very hills, their chasms and processions of beeches, were made unforgettable by his May opium dream.’

(In Pursuit of Spring, Edward Thomas)

‘Individuals and groups began to mark the landscape in ways that we can still discern today: they and their animals cleared the indigenous vegetation, and they began to manipulate and fashion soil and timber and stone into new kinds of construction and architecture; digging, piling, cutting, hauling, hoisting, carving, modelling, in a burst of creativity; engaging in activities far beyond the everyday needs for survival... These new features inscribe the landscape, shifting its very components. They involve the purposeful creation of a place; special places - places to be, places to believe, places in which particular things are done in particular ways. They separate and demarcate; they mark out, mark off and set aside particular locations.
They are transformations of space: these linear and circular configurations and singular sites affect and regulate the way space is used, perceived, experienced and interpreted. This place is suddenly and irrefutably distinguished from that... The challenge for us is to engage with these places as our ancestors did - creatively, with energy, conviction and commitment - rather than through the fabulation of what once occurred there... And perhaps site-specific performance is the most effective form of programme, with its ability to transform rapidly and demonstrate multiple articulations of event and space... Performance might even be ambivalent to the site as much as congruent with it.'

(Performing the Past, Mike Pearson)

27 March 2011. We fixed a puncture with sticky circles and got back on the road. By this stage of the bike ride spirits were waning. This was not meant to be leisure or exercise. It was though becoming only that. We had passed towns and villages, marked with dead, endlessly, unceasingly. The time had come to recall the reasons for this pursuit. And - if possible - fathom what it was that all this meant. We needed to meet yet more spectres and drag them into our linear performance. As something concrete needed to be said. The Other Man was more forthright. He suggested that we critique all that we had done to this point and start again. It was all held tenuously together by magic, by a naive romantic spiritualism. Where was the actual hard evidence? We could begin again where we end. That is what he would do, so he said. He was wrong though. He was trying to read what we were doing as straight or objective journalism. And was bothered by truth when all this was, was collective dreaming - rude, irrational, fantastical nonsense, gonzo journalism, muted, and deliberately obtuse: just youth attempting to connect with ancient landscapes. We had travelled the width of the country in one week. Jack Kerouac spent seven years on the road, hitchhiking east to west and back before writing his manual for the beat generation. We liked the beat ethos. A week cycling and staying in twee guesthouses though was always going to end in failure to dwell. We were devotees to the cause, acolytes, stalkers - just not very good at being beat. Much like the reverence of literary societies the trip was out of kilter with the original teachings of their secular saints: Jack
Kerouac back to Henry David Thoreau. Edward felt it more. Time spent cycling cross-country for him was transcendental. Oh Manchester: so much to answer for. Edward was my Dean Moriarty, my Neal Cassady, my *Austerlitz*. He had thrown himself in to the world around him. Walked in solitude daily to achieve some spiritual download. Some would say being at one with nature. Like Jack Kerouac that was for me an impossibility - to let go of the past and live in the moment, *for* the moment. We turned to drugs and drink. It would be a lie to say that there were no flashes of clarity cycling. Times when all that was apparent was the unfolding road ahead. These though were fleeting. And anyway that was not really the point of the pursuit west. Some sort of *Kerouacian Epiphany*. It was a chance to spend some quality time with Edward, to understand poetry like he did; site-writing, telling small stories - not making bleak observations of the city, comparing it to a picturesque wilderness. It is a route through what geographer Marion Shoard termed *Edgelands*. Not in terms of what she and poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts delineate are *Edgelands*. Rather an argument for the in-between. Noting as we went the in-betweeness - Edward/Me, We/I, City/Country, Society/Nature, Structure/Agency, Subjective/Objective, Subject/Object, Human/Non-Human, Person/Thing, Imagination/Materiality, Marx/Deleuze, Phenomenology/Post-Structuralism, Life/Death, Northern/Southern, Rich/Poor, Old/Young, Here/Gone, Couple/Single. Replacing dower forms of remembrance. The challenge set by Mike Pearson in *Performing the Past*. What Edward produced was a historical materialism of *bookmarks*, of imagination, resurrecting Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the rest - a paper trail in the margins. And by the end he was reborn, just like flowers in spring. He is remembered herewith. *Elegy is never enough.*

Edward slept the night in a new, clean, unfriendly place with linoleum. We met up in the western half of town, and resolved to reach the coast by midday. Edward recalled Bideford beside the quayside. And at a memorable tomb a man who smoked cigarettes that regilded the world. On a statue he could not see a passage quoted from one Edmund Spencer, remembering instead an annoying inscription about Richard Jefferies. He muttered something about literary accuracy and sites of literary pilgrimage, whilst negotiating the suburbs. At Wembdon Hill we could see the sea that we aimed for. A chiff-chaff sang, a lark crowed, and a telegraph wire
sizzled for Edward. The nuclear power station nestled silently in the foreground. Flat Holm and Steep Holm protruded middle distance. Wales a haze was just about in sight. It was not the sort of nuclear power station with giant concrete cooling towers. Clouds could not roll organic shadows over the blue and white metal boxes. This particular nuclear power station gave away little. There was no sense of the immense power housed within. It could have been an industrial estate; a gathering of nondescript boxes. They stuck out of the water mimicking the eminent Holms. The name Hinkley Point conjures up images of a secluded windy spot. Not nuclear fallout and radiation poisoning. That can all so easily change. Residents have a pill to take in a worst case scenario. Should the land be contaminated almost forever. We talked of a symbol for danger that could be read hundreds of thousands of years from now, after the anthropocene. Edward dismissed it as poppycock and wanted to change the world immediately. He tried to curtail the mindless pursuit of objects, of bigger and more destructive forms of transport, of power, of war. This was the only way for him to feel at peace. To travel endlessly and to document what he witnessed. It was interesting to see how he works. We dropped to a level and the first of the Quantocks rose up far-off. Sky was the bluest it had been all week. Contrails followed a symphony of hills. Grass the greenest it had been, stayed dotted by sheep. Ploughland outstretched. Paths of tractor tracks noted. Elms oddly spaced jutted in a hedgerow grid. It was beginning to feel like spring. Sunbeams shone on blossom, as the ground began to undulate. We had reached the foothills - two hundred feet up. In front the main ridge bulked.

Prior to the moorlands was a green sign. It had written on it Coleridge Cottage. Beside which was the National Trust symbol. Off the main road were more statements. Quantock Hills: area of outstanding natural beauty. Nether Stowey: please drive with care. We cycled first down a pretty street of cottages. Streams ran alongside the pavement. An odd little petrol station sat about half way down. We serve you daubed on the pumps amid retro logos and adverts for oil and tyres. Opposite was a disused hexagonal toll house. Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon impersonated the poet relentlessly. In Xanadu did Kubla Khan A stately pleasure-dome decree. Edward was less than impressed. Altogether Nether Stowey offered no temptations to be compared with those of the road leading out of it. A cottage at the end of the street was
announced as formerly housing Coleridge. Here Samuel Taylor Coleridge made his home 1797-1800, a reddish brown stone wreath declared. And a large National Trust sign stated that the plain white symmetrical house was open Thursday to Sunday, 1 April to 26 September, 2-5 pm, Adult £4, Children £2. There was also a painting of the poet hanging outside. As a result of these images the cottage could not be missed. The Ancient Mariner pub was opposite. It was hard not to equate the place and the poet. I saw similarities between Nether Stowey and Steep - a nice middleclass village, themed pubs and houses with plaques; their hills surrounding. Coleridge too was not born in the village so associated with him. Edward was disappointed by all the adoration an empty building got - acquired for the nation in 1908. It is though the way of heritage to inscribe and appropriate. And remove all other voices. Nether Stowey was hardly needed to summon up Coleridge grumbled Edward. The cult of celebrity was apparent. A number of mementos are on display: his inkstand, locks of his hair, and correspondence in his handwriting. Recently two further rooms on the first floor were opened. This came after an appeal by the Friends of Coleridge. The cottage is essentially a shrine of carefully placed objects. For it was there that he wrote-up the classic poems; This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison, Kubla Kahn, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, part of Christabel, and Frost at Midnight. A map outside a public toilet round the corner told a story. William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy lived a few miles away at Alfoxton House in Holford between July 1797 and June 1798. There is a trail joining the two houses. An immortal friendship now links the Quantock Hills with Exmoor. It goes through Watchet where a statue of the ancient mariner overlooks the harbour. The footprints of two famous poets still visible two hundred years on. Coleridge indented even with a badly scalded foot. Imagining his wife and friends out walking - Sarah Fricker, John Thelwall, William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, and Thomas Poole on springy heath, along the hill-top edge. The lime-tree bower his prison.

Beyond the Coleridge theme village were hills. They were under the stewardship of disciples. Edward became fantastic for a moment. It was the honeysuckle, the honeydew for nourishing genius. It had messed with his senses, intoxicated his heart. He felt that its magic touched genius to life. Before snapping back and realising the absurdity of such a thought. Yet magic alone
could have led Coleridge safely through the style of his age; the age of Stephen Duck and his benefactors. He could have continued honeydew fed raptures. But Coleridge loved equally mildness and wildness... the soft delicious greenery of the banks... the dark, bleak ridges of heather or pine. Edward rode directly to Holford, then the sea. He continued to summon Coleridge and after a while Wordsworth. I took the lanes instead, reaching the coast eventually. Land there sloped gently down from Nether Stowey to the nuclear power station. Strong easterly winds blew constant up the Bristol Channel and bent trees double. Their branches brushed the tops of hedgerows. The naked sticks left behind pointed to the right, towards the ever-increasing blue and white boxes sunk in sucking mud. At Stogursey the Other Man appeared suddenly from the east. He wore my helmet and was oddly riding a bike from London. One of the ones from the recent cycle hire scheme. By Shurton we were very close to the nuclear power station. It was completely silent. There was no buzzing or humming. No clamour of engines. Some grey geese wandered about in a garden. A llama or an alpaca grazed. Ducks floated in a pond. There were a few houses around a meeting of lanes. We turned left so the river channel was always on the right. Continuing the journey west together not talking. The nuclear power station remained in my eye line somehow. Like the after affect of a camera flash it burned itself there. Flat Holm and Steep Holm drifted about. It though squatted with such insistence, riding athwart the completely unpeopled smooth swells. In fact we were unable to find any watery voices. As a substitute Alice Oswald was remembered walking the River Dart from source to sea, inserting the counterpointed voices of river folk. A birdwatcher, a vicar, and an articled clerk. They haunt Sleepwalk on the Severn. A poem set at night over five different phases of the moon. New moon, half moon, full moon, no moon, moon reborn. The territory is mild and wild without romantic slips. It is based upon lots of trudging about. And shows an acute attentiveness to place: a form of deep topography, or landscape phenomenology. Yet the exercise has a mystical air. The occult beacon of the moon organizes the walking and the rhythm of the poem. Sleepwalk on the Severn playfully mocks the romantic urges of Coleridge and suchlike. While at the same time attempting to find the atmospheres they were privy to. It is in this sense also a psychogeographical defamiliarisation of place. An exercise much like the one Edward took in pursuit of the season, spring. And is a technique of movement through
landscape which manufactures new situations for the poet to experience. A second wave of psychogeographers took themselves on similar excursions. Moving the practice away from avant-garde Paris to millenial London. Iain Sinclair cosmologically circling its mystical underbelly: reinserting lay-lines. Will Self on his radial walks and biopsies, writing stratigraphy. Nick Papadimitriou on a liminal scarp: practicing hyperparticularity, destabilising normalcy. And Stewart Home with his radical nostalgia: displayed most wonderfully viciously in Cunt. All straddled the hinterlands and the hypermodern - muddy banks of rivers, metallic nuclear power stations. They had a profound dissatisfaction with the way people use places. And at the same time a sordid fascination with it. It seems to me that Edward had caught the bug. But there was and is no grand project. The new psychogeography was meant to fail. Guy Debord himself made it so. It was always so pleasingly vague. Only a few maps were ever produced. Alice Oswald reinvents this place. It is not a case of making up place. Neither imagination nor reality are ever at stake. It disorients and at the same time stays true to the affective atmosphere. And is perhaps more a form of psychogeology. The rhythm stays true to the patter of the river. We listened for the watery voices. *One among many moodswung creatures That have settled in this beautiful Uncountry of an Estuary Swans pitching your wings In the reedy layby of a vacancy Where the house of the sea Can be set up quickly and taken down in an hour. We heard the river again tugged at by the moon. Like a huge repeating mechanism Banging and banging the jetty Very hard to define, most close in kind To the mighty angels of purgatory Who come solar-powered into darkness Using no other sails than their shining wings Yes this is the moon this hurrying Muscular unsolid unstillness.*

So this, what is this, said the Other Man? A psychogeographic recycling to a psychogeographic hub, a radial excursion from the city, a mapping of poetic lay-lines, an attempt to get lost, a form of hyperparticularity, a placid version of Cunt? The Other Man remained there poking fun, a shadow on the horizon. Imprisoned by the spectacle, a definite, a certainty: everything else endlessly fluid, depressingly picturesque. Is my psyche being changed? Do I even have access to it to know if it is? The Other Man stopped me again. I ignored him. Because above the Severn, choreographed planes in the sky took me to some happy day. We were on a headland
much like the one re-cycled but elsewhere. In the far south, on the archipelago: the place where
the surfers go. Thoughts were nowhere, as they always were with her. Sea streamed off towards
the middle of the country, to more times of contented carefree drunkenness. Pasture greened
back to the black road surface and the pursuit. It was time to give up on personal therapy. Jump
off the edge and write what could happen. *Nothing behind me everything ahead of me - as is
ever so on the road.* Jack Kerouac once wrote. If only that were the case and it was not only new
landscapes that we were seeing *but the same landscape with a new pair of eyes.* And we could
defamiliarise ourselves with the places so woven into our psyche. Flip the world over into a
different type of experience; a wholly new one. Turn ordinary landscapes into spaces of
adventure. Reinvent place. Do the world as Marcel Proust would. *Everything that once was
truly lived though has moved away in to representation.* Guy Debord was right. Over the ridge
was the beach. Memories clung to it and the panniers. And in the end we yearned to represent
our recent past. To make it all seem important. It all only meant something if it was written.
What happened next is. We bridged the hump of head. Pheasants and sheep scattered. And I
remembered a first kiss. *Two lovers entwined passed me by.* They walked arm in arm down a
stony track away from the crumbling chantry, hens, and tea room. It was Coleridge and his wife.
*Lull with fond woe, and medicine me with sighs.* He whispered in her ear. A mess of bramble,
ivy and nettles fringed the two dark figures ahead; in amongst all that were some oak trees. We
reached a frontier. Scrub track gave on to grassy sand dunes. I sat with the two of them on the
flat grey pebbles. I had made it. Kilve Beach. Spring. We looked across the flat slate grey rock
pools dotted with splashing black dogs. And out on to the lighter grey-blue infinite corrugated
sea. All was in my eye line. Though *not even the sea could altogether detain the eyes.*
Westward: another hump of rolling green headland. And behind was gleaming blue sky. Crows
cut perfect shapes in it. Scarlet fire flung from the highest ridge. Beside a ragged cliff edge the
Other Couple sat. From a memorial bench they looked out to sea. Together with the dead. All
content in the warming sun. The glistening pebbly beach most captivating them. Underwriting a
*slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two isles of purple shadow.* There children skim small stones
on serene ponds. Plonk boulders with a plop. That hit the bottom with a crack. Dogs shake wet
hair dry. And people pull each other along in windblown arcs.
Heaven knows I’m miserable now gets mumbled. Light gets thrown up from a brook left. Noise clatters from a tea room right. Lovers are left to their fun. A slanting strip of tarmac through poplars and bungalows leads to a busy road. The one left for the lanes hours earlier. Nether Stowey in one direction, Watchet the other, Holford and Wordsworth a mile nearby. But it was a pub on the junction I was interested in. Edward ate there; in the Hood Arms. Perhaps he was still there boozing. At the bar they said that a man like Edward had left at two. But he had made up his mind to stay there for the night. It could have been the Other Man though, crossed my mind. It was impossible to distinguish between the two of them. I had passed him again at the church half way to the beach. He disappeared there for the last time. On his merry way once more, chortling about a perceived lack of weather-vanes. Edward returned but not until the next day up in the hills. For the next few hours I was bothered only by the road ahead. And occasionally by a druggy vision of Coleridge. A topiary maze on one of the slopes did not help. A nonsense of a sight just as the sun was beginning to set. Gilles Deleuze and Lewis Carroll discussed the merit of such a structure. Coleridge paced up and down one of the aisles. It was impenetrable by bicycle. East and West Quantoxhead were given a final glance. And I went on my way again. Up and down a succession of hills in a descending sky. The road hugged a towered church and graveyard framing it in the vale. A solitary brown horse with little white boots ate in its shade. It was an unnecessary section to bike. Although it did dig up fear from the belly and insert it in the conscious. A lorry hissed its brakes and snaked out and in a few times before finally passing. This was just as the last of the sun had by-passed the ridge rode along. And before any reflective attire had been attached to my dark back. An outline of the hills was still visible just. It was a case of keeping the head down and powering through. At the entrance to Wiliton a railway crossed beneath me heading into the darkness. There was what looked like a model railway station. A grey industrial estate boxed on the right, on the left a turn off for the Bakelite Museum. Both housed things. Just some were hollowed out, deemed useless - their use value altered to artwork. The sign proclaimed that Bakelite was a material of a thousand uses. These practical uses have since been lost to the world. Bright and resilient cookers, toasters, washing machines, napkin rings, salt and pepper shakers, irons, clocks, egg cups, televisions, gramophones, radios, hair dryers, electric heaters, vacuum cleaners, teeth, picnic sets, caravans,
telephones, and appropriately a coffin, all now museum pieces, historical exhibits, evocative of past times. Fun things that make the cheap tat we have now look incredibly dull. Only when I lay in bed beside yet another abbey did I recognise something - this pursuit was done in the spirit of the Bakelite Museum; curating beautiful, recently lost things - it was the dialectical image.

Preston, November 2011
The Grave of Winter

‘Thomas’s late start proves that poetry comes from mysterious sources, and may confirm a link between creativity and therapy. Two external factors made him a poet: Robert Frost and the First World War. But internal factors counted, too. Somehow his introspection reached a tipping point where he could turn neurosis into psychodrama. Poetry was no final fix. His poems record as well as recall his “disease”. But he no longer had to worry “whether for a person like myself whose most intense moments were those of depression a cure that destroys the depression may also destroy the intensity - a desperate remedy?”...

Thomas learned something of Freud when, in 1912, he underwent psychoanalysis. But he found his own language for poetic psychodrama. His poems often feature a split self or switch between patient and analyst. In “The Other”, the narrator and a double are locked into mutual pursuit (“no release / Until he ceases”). The speaker of “Wind and Mist” experiences the dissolution of "reality" (mist), then possession by another reality: “There were whole days and nights when the wind and I / Between us shared the world, and the wind ruled”. These poems are not peculiar to Thomas's case history, but perched on the troubled brink of modern selfhood.’

(Edna Longley, Roads from France)

‘I had found winter’s grave; I had found spring, and I was confident that I could ride home again and find spring all along the road. Perhaps I should hear the cuckoo by the time I was again at the Avon, and see cowslips tall on ditchesides and short on chalk slopes, bluebells in all hazel copses, orchises everywhere in the lengthening grass, and flowers of rosemary and crown imperial in cottage gardens, and in the streets of London cowslips, bluebells, and the unflower-like yellow-green spurge... Thus I leapt over April and into May, as I sat in the sun on the north
It had a more wintry feel than the day before. Edward set off westward early in order to catch up. In the meantime I packed the panniers for what would be a final time. And put together the crappy cream-plastic kettle. On the walls there were hung again some colourful prints of birds - three of them; a lark, a starling, and a wren. The faint trickling of a stream could be heard just over the kettle shaking itself apart. A bit of hill obscured by a tree and a car park was framed by the window. In the end I gave up on the tea and went to see the rain light morning that dashed in through the net curtains - heading east first of all to meet Edward. Cleeve Abbey unlike Mottisfont Abbey could not be missed. It was undergoing some re-creation. Heaps of stone and a digger where a formal garden should be. The bleat of sheep drowned out. A white horse would have its voice heard over the din. After all, his forebears owned this land; the inn was named in the honour of him. As soon as the skylark started up in response, traffic noise dispersed. And I was on my way past a number of masts - the strange lights from last night. Cars gargled consistently and went by unnoticed. Although a group of lads in a tacky motor did mock my red wind burnt face. Red wanker - original I thought, waiting beside an aquarium: the last in a succession of memorable sounds. For just one thing could be heard post Wiliton, with Edward only a few hundred yards ahead: the wind, as I soared down a hill to gain on him, dropping under a dead railway line, air blatting my ear drums, flies ramming my eyes, flush face re-reddened. The foothills slowed me up. I began to pedal again by Keith Richards, stood outside his antique shop. Edward on his older bike could not carry the speed of the downhill sections for long. And we ended up riding together from a brown tower in Bicknoller on, talking of waterproofs. Edward had a hypercynicism about him, reminiscent of Will Self - taking something seemingly mundane, and somehow making it wonderfully so. The waterproof trouser is an example of his art. He spoke of them at length through Crowcombe and Flaxpool, shouting over in intervals. I have, it is true, discovered several which have bought me through a storm.
dry in parts... But nobody makes a garment or suit which will keep a man both dry and comfortable if he is walking in heavy and beating rain... I am not speaking of waterproof tubes reaching to the feet. They may be sold, they may even be bought. They may be useful, but not for walking in. We were by this time directly beneath one of the highest peaks - Lydeard Hill. It was the sun burnt green of a lawn in summer, scrub crossed haphazardly by pine, hazy in the midday sky. A disused quarry left a pale grey circle near the top. Sheep were unmoved by our noisy presence. A rabbit ducked and pricked up. Edward continued and aimed a question. **At first thought, it is humiliating to realize that we have spent many centuries in this climate and never produced anything to keep us dry and comfortable in the rain. But who are we that complain? Not farmers, labourers, and fishermen, but people who spend much time out of doors by choice.**

It was a hard slog climbing to a thousand feet. It would have been impossible earlier in the pursuit. A novice tentatively skirting around parked cars in Clapham. The bodily movements were unrecognisable. Of course the pub near the summit was closed. It mattered not for we could survey all we had ridden; the Mendips and Nether Stowey, Kilve, Watchet, Bridgwater. And all that we had not; the sea, the islands, Exmoor, and Wales. We had come a long way together in a short space of time. And travelled an age from the early days in Steep. Resting at the top Edward wrote of his profound joy at finding something. I knew what he meant. After a tough cycle he had found his poetic voice - that was what he was in pursuit of, not merely spring. And he was confident that he could ride home and find it all along the road; in a sort of poetic euphoria, where a flow of poesis could occur. He had become a bard on that bike. This was it. His demons were written down. The story of the Other Man had been told. This was his therapy. He could become a poet. **The sun had dried the turf and warmed it. The million gorse petals seemed to be flames sown by the sun. By the side of the road were the first bluebells and cowslips. They were not growing there, but some child had gathered them below at Stowey or Durleigh, and then, getting tired of them, had dropped them. They were beginning to wilt, but they lay open the grave of winter. I was quite sure of that. Winter may rise up through mould alive with violets and primroses and daffodils, but when cowslips and bluebells have grown**
over his grave he cannot rise again: he is dead and rotten, and from his ashes the blossoms are springing. Therefore, I was very glad to see them. On the hill beside the dying flowers was a stone. The Edward Thomas Fellowship had visited it. They were drawn to it after hearing that Edward had found spring nearby. The stone much like the memorial stone in Steep was not a grave, and this was not the grave of winter. Yet mourning always seems to accompany the footprints of poets. It is I suppose amplified due to his untimely death. I was glad to have haunted Edward for a while instead of the other way around. The rain eventually coaxed me down. And I pedalled through fields of wheat taller than my bike and torso. From there it was hard to know where to go next. Edward had ended his written account up above. But the pursuit lived on in his poems. Whole sections of prose from our pursuit were fashioned into haunting depictions of landscape. Landscape threatened by war and the relentless force of industrialisation. No one should write anything about themselves without first reading an Edward Thomas poem. The Other Man is recurrent; his other self, his nagging doubt. A slight on the lack of spiritual fulfilment the modern self has. This was the start of his epically creative last four years.

THE END
Poems

Road kill, myself, and other dead animals

‘If the theory is correct that feeling is not located in the head, that we sentiently experience a window, a cloud, a tree not in our brains but, rather, in the place where we see it, then we are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside ourselves.’

(One-Way Street, Walter Benjamin)

‘Whatever knots, ethically, philosophically, you tie in the tongue, it comes down to the pattern of words on the page. The grunt of performance. The shape absence leaves on the landscape. Poets were dying too fast and it hurt... Poetry is conspiracy. Poetry is a virus. Poets, sick with pride, chosen and cursed, habitués of the worst bars, the grimmest cafes, night-birds, defacers of notebooks, feed on the glamour of truth. Immortality postponed. They are owl-heads, hawkers of misremembered quotations. Solitaries jealous of their hard-won obscurity.’

(Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project, Iain Sinclair)
Grey Box

A grey box on the edge of town,
some corners straight up and down;
inside there could be anything,
the facade is faceless, unrevealing.

It could house a house for a mouse,
a rat for a cat or some tat for a twat,
most likely the latter the cat is not fatter,
sat beside a lorry guarding some matter.

Over time the grey box multiplied,
a blue one a yellow one loads I spied,
while all the shops on the street closed
and the candlestick maker cried.

One day I saw inside the grey box
when I crept as cunningly as a fox,
what I saw to this day still shocks,
a box sat on top of a box
sat beside a box.
Some Horses

Some horses wandered
back and forth unhindered,
across a farmer’s field
under pylons chained.

Nothing much else happened
when the train stopped
on the outskirts of Minehead,
bar the horses being intrigued
by the presence of a weed
beside their lush field.

Most passengers just read
while the horses advanced,
the chance to see them spurned,
the printed word preferred
to the world
visible if they turned.
**Badger**

I talk to myself a lot now dead badger, 
guts spilt out in a pointless red anger, 
blackened face flattened to the hard tarmac, 
stupid creatures if only we’d turned back.

I passed your friend splayed over the curb, 
strewn with the rubbish thrown from turds, 
we did not chat though I turned away, 
anyway after everything what could I say.

Sleep now I will go and leave you in peace; 
pity I could not know you as an old badger, 
the road continues but we do not as once 
I turn this corner I am finally gone yonder. 
I talk to myself a lot now dead badger 
because you are no longer my badger.
Gazing

A narrow chalk path aslant; ascending
not directly over the crest like in the past,
via the sparkling shards of willow pattern plate
but up a shallow slope hung above a patch of pine,
on the side of the hanger amongst dense beech.

A short cut facing out to sea; climbing
at pace the natural staircase
jutting from the sheer scarp face,
a slippage of faults in soft porous rock.

Erosion of the cliffs over Petersfield,
selfsame strata dive down to the sea at Dover
dug away at through the toil of wind and water,
this southern most band of calcium carbonate.

On the landing a smooth plateau;
a sweep of the head from right to left,
sixty miles of sands and clays in an instant.

Eye now racing from the rising tide to a suicide;
the tormented Woolf hearing voices
fills pockets full of stones and drowns herself.

A statue marks the spot of death,
a pilgrimage site for a brisk mourning walk,
throw yourself into the river in a maccarbe homage
to a prominent member of the Bloomsbury set

and not to forget, Algernon Charles Swinburne
past those smooth-swelling unending downs,
on the south coast walking the line
ignoring those grey seaside towns.
Mole

Water had gathered in the deep trenches
where wheels had passed over for centuries,
down the narrow treacherous green lane.

Drenched cheap trainers began digging at my feet
leaving me looking down more often to concentrate,
I noticed when slowing and studying my gait
on the ground a dead mole face up arms outstretched;
there was not a scratch upon it.

Its heart stopped from a fright, a loud noise,
perhaps a blast from a gun. Bending down
I reached for the mole and stroked the fur on its belly,
before picking it up. It was not larger than my palm;
touching it I was surprised at its warmth and its softness.
Not long since it had gone.
Tent

Rubbing hard on crusty eyes
footsteps and voices nearby,
the sun already streaming in and
the smell of bacon wafting over,
piecing things together slowly;
in my grimy clothes I lay
with a chronic lack of saliva.

A sleeping bag covering a girl
bar the head and pale bare shoulder,
openmouthed, hair curled across her,
fresh faced and serene beside
in the light now dropping through,
not stirred from her sleep but sweaty,
I left her to her dreams exiting quietly,
wanting to stay but unable to,
stumbling over debauchery;

fag ends, baggies, vomit, empties,
a cup of rancid ash on burnt grass,
playing cards strewn with shit scraps,
over splayed polystyrene takeaway trays,
screaming kids with pushy parents,
communal bogs and a hose ten feet off
to sear away the sheen of gear my eyes amass,
when days elapse between sleep and wake -
the remnants of a decrepit life,
bits and pieces and loose ends,
increment by increment
in that tent.
A Meeting

A literary society
bent on revering a poet
the forgotten chap of words
worried me a little.

After ten minutes or so
two gentlemen arrived
sporting suitable attire,
carrying poems and an explorer map.

Dressed in gear,
which was less shiny than I imagined;
woollen socks, corduroy trousers, leather boots, tweed cap.
The cagoule was bagged.

A blue aluminium stick was on show
jutting from a hand,
indicating that I had not driven through time
but the Downs of Southern England.
End

The pit of my stomach fell out
at the sight of the solitary pine.
Seeing it alone, rooted, in the centre
of a vast expanse of dusty green
lit faded memories. They flashed
as the pine loitered in my head
bringing to an end the distant
dream of redemption I had had.
A Drive

The a34 allows me to drift off; be alone, seek the comatose self, in the placeless space of car land where visions of people swirl on a haze of featureless lanes of tarmac, unrolling, on and on.

I seamlessly merge into nothingness, on to another ribbon of routine before Winchester; automatically I drove on detached once more from a swelling landscape which could inspire one.

Not until a few miles from Petersfield did the road knit the landscape up; tying together what appeared to me to be the ancient folds and gashes of a giant duvet of mostly pale green. Increasingly the road narrowed, its surface pitted, twisted and dipped, hanging on to, following and bridging a shallow meandering stream.

The road now descended rapidly, turns tighter and tighter inside Jenny’s copse a necessary byway. Shadows danced on the car in front as we bunched the dashboard lit up. The landscape no longer rapidly unrolled but remained in my mind forever unchanged; field, hedgerow, field, hedgerow, field, hedgerow, green, brown, green, brown, green, brown, bisected by sky, blue, blue, blue, clouds, wispy white, crows, black swoops, a gap, five bar gate, an oak tree, standing alone, cow, cow, cow, side on, unmoving, chalk Downs, southern England: a tomb. Light, bright, white, out, open, a round-about, straight over to the Railway Station. I parked and waited.
**Hay fever**

Concentrating on nothing but my body
sweaty flesh and aching muscles

with no memory of words
only basic landforms;

green corn field barbed wire fence
trees in the distance a desire path

follow it out of this green blur

feeling like a city boy more than ever
not used to the pungent country air

folding a tissue this way and that
longing to be back in the beating heart

of natal red brick and grey concrete
wandering the tarmac street.
Gin tears

the girlfriend felt she was getting drunk at last
at the same time it crossed my mind
that we really should be leaving
it was funny
a few minutes before the argument started
I had a feeling something was wrong
I looked warily round and my gaze settled
on a couple in the corner
I thought nothing of their arguing to begin with
as it grew louder the room became interested
I struggle now to remember what they were arguing about
it ended with a slap that much I remember
the guy who squatted in the house down the Cowley Road
a friend of a friend said and did nothing
just drank a pink drink and shrugged
he had just cooked up in his bedroom
and was gutted when everyone dispersed soon after
before the shooting up
I was stone cold sober
but the girlfriend was by then gin addled
inevitability she would break down at some point
miserably it was only a matter of time
I lost her for a bit in the melee post slap

I hated to hear her sobbing back then
I can just about remember the contorted face
and the noise that came out of it
a yelping snifflle that would not stop
it was out of her control hyperventilating
as the tears continued to drip from her chin
and the gin mist took hold
in the taxi or in her bedroom it did not matter
she talked only of my momentary absence and sobbed
until eventually exhausted she slumped to one side
closed her blood shot eyes and snored

absent always now those nights cling on just
and out themselves as a sound a sight a smell
memories are made of only this as I dwell
in a point in time spent alone with her
when I think I can hear those sweet gin tears
through the endless drunken din
Pub drunk

It was a scruffier pub in his day;
set in the middle of the Hangers
winded around by vines
propping up the frontage,
inside a smoking room
and a variety of ales in barrels.

The toilets remained unchanged
on the opposite side of the lane -
a tarmac garden of sorts;
the endearing outdoor bogs
with a trough to piss in,
enclosed the dozen or so benches
in crumbling brick structures.

Greengage, apple, mulberry, and fir trees
were spotted with delphiniums, poppies,
everlasting-sweet peas, roses and dahlias.
While in a shady corner campanula,
phlox, and allium grew.
The solitude of this spot
meant he never moved far.

One would see whilst walking
him always sat here drinking -
the last time he was pottering around
all stooped over with a head of white hair.
Not long after this visit he passed away -
his wife died too a few months later;
she would walk the dog this way
to fetch him back home.
Skyline eye

Once the shoulder was again visible in the distance
I remembered my movements and nipped across
a couple of recently harvested soggy wheat fields
where a lack of colour was evident amongst short sharp stems
crunching and squeaking loudly beneath my soles:
no rough poppy, corn marigold, or corn chamomile
as had been noted in the past in these parts mingled,
only the familiar dusty green the field had been sown with:
the pretty wild flowers had been killed off,
weeded out, fertilised, without local protest.

Behind the now empty field on the skyline
stood the silhouette of the shoulder shaped scarp
covered in trees; magnificent beeches.
A proposal to cut down the beeches
that populated the hanger was tabled in the fifties -
the most beautiful trees were saved though
especially those on the skyline.
Still the richest woodland on English chalk;
the Ashford Hangers devoid of flowers.
Time Flies (1)

When you’re having fun
the time flies come
and steal in their droves
the time you kill.

The little blighters’ wing
and swarm until you can’t
remember anything of before
numb desensitized to pain
drowning in endless rain.

You are five years older
bewildered none the wiser.
Where did all the time go?

Spend your time productively
make a timely exit
with a timeless beauty
instead of flitting about.

It’s your own time you’re wasting
not that you know that while drinking
the flies press on and the ship begins sinking
they have the time now
and there’s no getting it back.

With impeccable timing they come
while you take time out to remember
with old father time
that you don’t have the time
to be messing around drinking.

So you leave and promise to sort yourself out
through good times bad times indifferent times
earn yourself time and a half
and bargain with the flies
before time kills you.
Time Flies (2)

When you’re having fun
the time flies come
and steal in their droves
the time you kill.

The little blighters wing
and swarm until you can’t
remember anything of before,
suddenly five years older
bewildered none the wiser.

It’s your own time you’re wasting -
not that you know that while drinking
the flies press on and you begin sinking;
they have the time now
and there’s no getting it back.

With impeccable timing they come
while you take time out to remember
with old father time
that you don’t have the time
to be messing around drinking.

You leave and promise to sort yourself out
through good times and bad times
swear to spend your time wisely
and make a timely exit
with a timeless beauty
instead of flitting about town
earn yourself time and a half
and the chance to bargain with the flies
before time kills you.
We are all damaged goods

Find beauty in damaged things; watch a bird with broken wings that in a sad song loudly sings and to you its soul it brings.
Lucky Cow

Beyond the pane
of a packed train
a lonely cow
sat in solitude
in a field.

Separated from the other
slack-jawed fat cattle
crowded around the gate,
mindlessly grouped to wait,
discussing the latest trait,
hoping not to be late.

Making a break for it
the lonely cow stood up
came over to the train
and stared in for a while
at the herd in their pen,
munching away groaning.

I gorped at the cow
now sat back down
content having a think,
while the train remained
delaying our slaughter;
murder me now
lucky cow.
Appendix

Author’s Q&A

This appendix was added at the request of my examiners Dr Hayden Lorimer and Dr Ian Cook. They put the following seven questions to me.

1. What do readers need to know about the variety of sources for the text appearing in this thesis document? (e.g. can you provide a user’s guide to help differentiate between your words/his words/others’ words)

The sources in this text are Edward Thomas related - they tend to be old country books or poems, which influenced Edward Thomas and appear in his work, recent writings that resonate with his undertakings, perhaps making reference to his work, or in many cases they are the work of Thomas himself. The reason for this was to use Edward Thomas as a lens to consider writing landscape through. It is not necessary to know, or have read all of the texts that appear but it may be useful to know that they are texts that are generally harked back to by new nature writers. And all could be seen as part of the same tradition. These sources appear in the text in *italics*. The words not in italics are my words; which were sometimes informed by the literary societies wandered with. The sources that appear are considered to be a part of the landscape, as the region walked in has been overwritten for centuries. They are referred to at the places they attempt to represent. Appearing as *bookmarks*. 
2. What could readers usefully know about the intended relationship between the epigrammatic passages of philosophy/social theory that open each thesis section, and the actual contents of those thesis sections?

The epigrammatic passages at the start of each section are there to remind the reader of the arguments contained within this thesis. They also act as a provocation for the reader, and as such are a way in to the next section for them. For this reason the passages are therefore often philosophers/social theorists who have influenced the reasons behind writing a thesis such as this, and thus my ontology. When they are not the writings of philosophers/social theorists, the passages are thought provoking statements from writers I admire and whose work this thesis emulates and continues. They specifically resonate with an experience I had myself out wandering in what directly follows the epigrammatic passage, or they chime with the overall argument that this thesis makes.

3. In summary form, can you outline how, and where, the thesis is to be located within contemporary human geographical enquiry? (e.g. are there particular disciplinarily fields/literatures/debates that the thesis speaks to, either directly or obliquely?)

This thesis is a piece of cultural geography. It speaks directly to a specific disciplinary debate about writing the self, which is covered in detail in the preface. I follow in the footsteps of non-representational geographers in particular, in working through this issue (these geographers are cited in the preface and their work resonates throughout). Another issue which the thesis aims to confront, is that to do something in a non-representational manner, would imply that representations become less important. The thesis also obliquely speaks to historical
geographers writing about memory and place, could be considered a piece of political geography if read as a treatise for artistic endeavour, and relates to the work of geographers writing about the more-than-human using an object orientated philosophy. The thesis though in the main draws together the landscape and walking literature of new cultural geography and non-representational theory.

4. What is the best methodological description that could be employed to characterise the research praxis for the project, and why? (e.g. anti/after method, auto-ethnographic, and/or, an open exercise in ‘creative research practice’)

All of the above could be used to characterise the research praxis for this project. Depending on the reader, the thesis could be considered anti/after method, auto-ethnographic, or an open exercise in creative research praxis. Where this thesis differs from others is that writing itself becomes a research method. The form and shape of the words on the page were greatly important to the success of the piece. It was through words that I attempted to understand the landscapes wandered in, and through words that I tried to relate a sense of being-there - writing through landscape. There was a lot of trial and error, and playing with it as a methodology, to find some sort of voice. This comes through in the preamble work. I termed the methodology, Literary Hitchhiking, in order to make some sense of what I was doing and relay that to the reader.

5. What is the relationship intended between the text and the illustrative photographs included in the thesis?
I wanted photographs interspersed with rambling storytelling - a shock of evidencing within something which reports events oddly, weaving words deliberately obliquely and nonsensically at times, muddying ideas of truth and fact, here, present, past, dead, alive. They act as a reference point for the reader; storytelling in a different manner to the prose - and are synonymous with the books about landscape considered in the thesis. In the earlier work they are there, as I thought a reader might enjoy seeing the grounded nature of representation - a poem comes from something. It allows them to see in a sense, the inspiration behind the verse; the materiality of imagination. They see, or at least think they see, something actually happening - they are duped into this feeling, and it is this that I wanted to play with. While I wanted to achieve this affect, I also did not want to be so prescriptive about the way the photographs were viewed alongside the text. As in a W.G Sebald travelogue, they were not captioned. In addition to this, the photographs were intended to be haunting, and intimate loss. They were often placed at the end of each section to work in a similar way to the epigrammatic passages - they resonated back to a point in the journey I considered to be of importance, and relevant to the argument of the thesis. In a sense, the photographs mimic the poems at the end of the thesis, and the yearning to make the glimpsed good place permanent.

6. What reading effect is intended by the unconventional stylistic approach taken to referencing and citation employed in the thesis?

It was an attempt to play with the idea of subjectivity and authorship. If the words are objects found in the land, then they could be bumped in to and dragged into my consciousness and subsequent prose. I began to write in short sentences to beat a rhythm - to mimic stepping, pushing down on a pedal, or the gargling of an engine. My paragraphs became longer and
stopped when I stopped. Or more accurately when, somebody, or something, stopped me. And restarted, when I started again to walk, cycle, or drive. The people I dragged into the work and embedded into my prose were ones I met along the way. Citing as such, enabled me to converse with them and their works differently. Where I end and they begin became purposefully obtuse. I wanted the reader to stumble less over a change in voice. Is it even a change in voice? To cite traditionally would have separated us all out again. I also wanted the thesis to look different on the page. I was playing again with the idea of these books being a part of the landscape, as much as famous landmarks. These works being in *italics*, mimicked the scratches and marks they made in my understanding of the landscape.

7. What possibilities does this form of ‘creative geographical writing’ open up for current/future endeavour?

I often wonder what would have happened if Edward Thomas had gone to America and taken up Robert Frost on his offer. What routes would he have taken? What would he have experienced? I like to imagine his other possible future, and map it across America. Now that my psyche is irreducibly entangled with his, I feel I could somehow chart this journey. I could therefore have pushed the limits of this thesis further. This is what creative geographical writing, and I hope this thesis, opens up for future endeavour. The possibility of a geographer writing something about people and place, which pushes ideas of truth and fiction beyond what I have done here in order to make a point, and if it is good prose bring about discussion and change. The thesis is essentially, thinking and writing space for geographers. The possibility of tracing networks of representation, and writing through landscape with a sensuous and material attentiveness, are written here. I wanted to *use* poetry, to demonstrate that it is possible to be a writer and a geographer, whilst still speaking back to disciplinary debates.
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