
GROUNDWORK

with the earth's rotation \\\ summer solstice \\\
coast to coast \\\ sundown to sunrise \\\

Abigail Reynolds

I had imagined that it would be like walking through a very dark pen and ink Samuel Palmer drawing. Everything would be humped and hollowed by the cold clean light of the full moon. Shadows would be sharply slanted; distinct in monochrome. There'd be a brittle clarity to the form of the tree canopy against the sky, and the white foam of the breakers on the strand.

Chapter 1 ///

Half past nine. Solstice sunset

I am standing in the rain with seventeen other people on Predannack Head on the southernmost coast of the Lizard. We plan to set out at ten pm, after watching the sun's seeming descent into the sea. From the green cliff top we stare out at the Atlantic. It's a lonely place. We stand silently with the drizzle blowing cold into our faces. The sun, shrouded by dense low cloud, invisibly vanishes behind the moving edge of the earth – to the Western isles – which the Celts knew as the land of the dead.

We will walk with the rotation of the earth. By the time the sun can be seen again above the sea's horizon we will have crossed the peninsular to the Eastern shore.

Half the walkers are artists. The other half are the Vyvyan family. Sir Ferrers Vyvyan and his wife Victoria have five sons. He will lead the first part of this walk, which is properly understood as an absolutely straight ceremonial way from Ogo Dour to Dry Tree; a ritual landscape. I will lead the second half of the walk, following a line of gabbro stone from Dry Tree to Dean point on the East coast.

Black rocks below us arranged in the white swell. Rain blowing in from the sea, tasting of salt. 'Egg and bacon' growing in clumps along with sea pinks in the tough salty grass. We have come here to walk with the rotation of the earth, which is moving at 1,600km/hr.

I have tried hard to understand exactly what a solstice is. Moon shapes, and the fact that we inhabit a spinning, tilted ball, are beyond real understanding for me, and seem counter-intuitive. I still look at the sun as it sinks into the sea and feel as though it is the sun that is moving. When I found the word 'Troheaul', which translates as 'sunturn' in the old Borlase dictionary of Cornish words, I realised that the word could be used simply to mean the solstice:

Troheaul. This is a turn '...such as the Druids made, and the inhabitants of the Western Isles still make in salutations and worship.'

We are walking in the spirit of this ritual or salutation. In all the rotations and alignments and orbits of the celestial bodies there's a still moment. A sort of holding-of-the-breath. Which is now.

Turning our backs on the sea, we move away from the cliff as if blown by the prevailing wind. Ogo dour (the water cave) is before us until we curve back inland to the farms.

Veined bladders of the white sea campion. Stone crop.
Lichen, both the bearded kind in powdery fluorescent eau-de-nil and the bright medallion flat kind, which is a rich gorse gold.

Long sappy strands of bright sticky chickweed, yellowing alexanders gone over, rust-spotted dock leaves and high nettles.

On this lane, called 'Ghost Road', we have left behind the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the National Trust farms of Predannack Wollas. Now we are in the generality of rural England. A scrappy caravan and a ditch. We take a 'public byway' running behind 'Seaview camping', which is attached to the sort of farm that doesn't see any need to clear defunct machinery out of the yard.

The gloom is deepening imperceptibly.

As twilight deepens the colours bleed away. The first colour I notice that I have stopped seeing is pink.

The rain is falling with a determined eking out of itself, like a long distance runner. Cornish rain, when heavy and horizontal, will tire fast, but this thin determined pattering rain means to stay with us. Feeling rather clumsy and stupid as I plot the tangled route in the drizzle, my hair wet, my hands and feet swatted by fronds, Russell Hoban's curious and engulfing novel 'Riddley Walker' comes to me.

From the first scene on Riddley's name day, the rain 'hispers' or more fiercely drums through the whole story of Riddley Walker and his riddles. He steadfastly walks the Isle of Thanet in the indeterminate future, through constant 'girzel'. The rain fixes the tone of the novel.

Something that must be inhabited, the rain. Something in you that wouldn't choose to be exposed to it, that's averse, and yet, once you've given yourself up to the rain, it's almost comforting. Enfolding rather than enclosing.

Hoban values instinct and the indistinct. Perhaps rain expresses a turn away from hard clarity. The novel opens with a story called 'Hart of the Wood' in which 'Mr Clevver' persuades two starving parents to kill their only child and give him the heart, in return for fire.

'He cookt the hart of the chyld and et it. The clevver looking bloak said, 'Clevverness is gone now but littl by littl itwl come back.'

Then off he goes, leaving the parents to eat the body of their child. The fire burns out of control as they sleep, immolating both of them, and leaving the reader puzzling the desirability of cleverness. With these indistinct thoughts puddling in my head, we move on rather clumsily, a ramshackle pack stepping through the rain along the path around Predannack airfield, into a definite lack of clarity. The tone of the rain is gentle as twilight falls.

I had imagined that it would be like walking through a Samuel Palmer drawing. But now, as I walk, it's not at all like Samuel Palmer's drawings, nor any work of art I can name because it is smudgy charcoal dark, thin rain constantly blowing down from the low cloud. The sky is smothered by an undifferentiated dense blanket of cloud that muffles the moonlight. The water beneath my feet has soaked deep into the sod. My sodden clothes, my wet hair connects me by water high up above body and beyond sight, to wherever the cloudbank ceases. I am lodged in a downward flow and dispersion.

Chapter 4 ///

Ferrers

The bitter smell of crushed weeds surrounds me, and it's the strongest signal that I'm getting, stronger than sight or touch, though the blue outlines of the weeds and the shrubs, crowd me all in their full midsummer livery. Wind shakes the water off the trees in big drops.

The Vyvyans have lived at Trelowarren since 1427, when they were excommunicated and ejected from Penwith for piracy. They anciently owned all this land, but were forced to sell it off in the 1930s. I have seen the old deeds. Ferrers has an intimate and ancestral knowledge of the land, and he is shy of sharing this with other people.

Perhaps this is like allowing visitors into my studio – which is my personal ancestral realm. Artists' studios are fragile battlegrounds of hard-won victories over matter and meaning. I don't share that lightly. If I am going to share my small eggshell world it has to be with someone empathetic. I don't care to argue or persuade or explain. Sharing can feel as though something is being wrenched out of my hands... or it can be beautifully affirming.

Belonging for me is not to do with the accidents of blood and neither is understanding. Most things of significance in my life are by adoption. Hoban, the author of 'Riddley Walker', believed that we have cultural memory beyond our life spans, indeed back into the far past, if only we 'lissen'.

Chapter 5 ///

11 o'clock. The straight track to Dry Tree

We are walking across the moor with a hedge bank to our right, the wind at our backs. The wind stops our ears. There's a strong smell of aniseed from the crushed cow parsley that the walkers ahead of me have trampled. The pale umbellifer heads nod like small lamps. All colour has drained away.

We pause when the line of the tall hedge of forestry ends. The flat moor vanishes into the fog.

Some walkers have switched on a torch, which makes walking far more difficult. In the wavering torch beams I see that horses have used this track.

I am told there are orchids, and sometimes I think perhaps I glimpse them in the swinging torchlights. White stones to the side sometimes. Black heaps.

We pass the tumuli; bronze-age barrows, medieval turf stacks, anti-glider obstructions from World War II, all jumbled up and indistinguishable from each other in the darkness. In the range of greys in front of me the other walkers appear as fixed points since we all move at the same pace.

We come into sight of the satellite station. Huge dark circular forms, faint in the grey rain. Each dish has a dim red beacon light. Each is looking or listening to different quarters of the sky and the spinning satellites that inhabit these regions. One dish points dead upward like a bowl to hold water.

Chapter 6 ///

Dry Tree & Telstar

Dry Tree is a stone monolith erected about 4,000 years ago in the early bronze age. Dry Tree now I reckon is ten feet tall, though it once was taller by three feet. It is a pillar of gabbro stone, which links it to the end point of our walk, the gabbro quarry at Dean point. Dry Tree was discovered in 1850 lying on its side and left undisturbed until three feet were lopped off it by soldiers resurfacing the road in 1916. They were prevented from entirely breaking up the stone by the great grandfather of Ferrers - Sir Courtney Vyvyan, the tenth Baronet of Trelowarren - who arranged for Dry Tree to be set up again.

It absolutely invites embrace. Honeysuckle grows at its foot. It's odd how strong the desire is to encircle it with arms.

The stones are not temples, but they mark sight lines and connections. Perhaps they were walked according to the sun. The satellite communications station is a newer iteration of this. 'Telstar' was built in collaboration with the General Post Office in 1962. It's here because it's the clearest view of the sky on this flat open moor at the dead centre of the Lizard.

Somehow Telstar confirms the instinct of Dry Tree. It feels uncomfortable to stand here though, because it's so crowded with oversized over-significant shapes.

We are too cold.

Chapter 7 ///

Half past midnight. The farms

We are half way into our ten-mile journey. At Traboe cross we abruptly turn from a compass bearing of 45 degrees north-east to face directly east and take the route that I've chosen across the fields, trying to keep a straight line to Godrevy cove.

Across the fields our momentum subtly shifts, as though we have trained ourselves to walk quietly at the most effective speed. I am contained within the rhythm of our strides and our breathing and the dark. I am detached from myself.

The walkers merge together into a blind force sweeping its way relentlessly across the land like a wave or a ripple from edge to edge of the peninsular. Rather than navigate by sight, it's as though we move by feel or smell like a pack of dogs, or turtles in the ocean swimming to their spawning ground.

We stop talking, as though everything including our minds has become muffled in the rain and dark. We become the formless dark.

The person I am and the place I am in melt into each other. Rather than occupy my identity, I am a simple flesh and bone body, part of a pack, moving by scent rather than the map.

Maybe it is like being dead and underground diffusing into the soil.

I am blurred into the rain.

At times I feel very light as though I am floating along the road like a ghost. Sometimes I am like ink dispersed into water - I am diffused. Then, maybe when we stop for a stile or wait to file into a narrow way I become aware of my substance again like a clot. I pool like a clot at the bottom of a liquid.

Loam feet
Formlessness
Softness

Chapter 8 ///

Stones. Half past one

As we walk across a pasture, I sense that our approach has set large living bodies in motion. I feel the tremor of hooves beating the ground, very muffled in the wet grass, and have a sense of some warm thing, moving as a mass in relation to us moving as a mass. It is unnerving, this heavy force, summing us up, orbiting us, halting and galloping off again. I don't know if the creatures are cows or horses. I cannot track their ellipse except in patches.

We walk by a huge flat stone by Trevean lying in the field by the track that leads across the wooded end of an enclosed garden. In the centre of the following field is a long stone. Suddenly Riddley is back walking beside me with the seventeen other bodies...

'This nex what I'm writing down it aint no story tol to me nor it aint no dream. Its jus some thing come in to my head.'

Stoan

Stoans want to be lissent to. The big brown stoans in the formers feel they want to stan up and talk like men. Some times youwl see them lying on the groun with ther humps and hollers theywl say to you, sit a wyl and res easy why dont you. Then when youre sitting on them theywl talk and theywyl tel you if you lissen. Theywyl tel whats in them but you wont hear nothing what theyre saying without you go as fas as the stoan. You myt think a stoanis slow thats becaws you wont see it moving. Wont see it walking a roun. That dont mean its slow tho.

If you cud fly way way up like a saddelite bird over the sea and you lookit down you wunt see the waves moving youwd see them change 1 way to a nother only you wunt see them moving youwd be too far a way. You wunt see nothing only a changing stilness. Its the same with a stoan.'

Forcing our way through fleshy river weeds and nettles and over lines of barbed wire that shut off the path, we cross one of the many small unnamed springs over a broken plank. Our way across the Lizard is flat, with only one steep hill up to Grugwith.

The grass of the hill is luxuriant – deep shimmering black grass, up to my knees. It temporarily breaks the rhythm of our efficient strides, imposing a long high step, like wading in a river. Hissing through the grass, we swarm up the hill, which feels magically potent, since it is the only hill of the entire night, rippling with the dark grass in the rain. At the top of the hill I feel light, and I feel as though the sky is lightening too. But it can't be.

This rain-carrying wind blows nothing to me. The air is not salty inland, so the taste on your skin is just yourself. Which is the same as nothing. Hollow air.

In the gardens that enclose the footpath, the houses are asleep. We slither over the slick rain-drenched surfaces of the granite stiles, polished by many generations of feet. Often, one of us falls, snatching at the leaves of tall weeds and bushes to steady ourselves.

We slip through the sleeping village of St Keverne, in an orange penumbra of the sodium street lamps, and take the narrow road down to Rosenithon. We pass the bungalow where eighty-five year old Ed Retallack still lives, in the house he built himself. Ed worked his whole life in Dean Quarry here, and retired as the quarry manager. He'd walk to work in the quarry, on the footpath which we take now through the fields to the beach. He brought home the mineral finds that were unearthed. His eccentric collection now lies in home-made display cases that he has built around his dining room table.

There was no beach originally at Godrevy Cove. This shingle has been produced by a century of tailings from Dean Quarry and Porthoustock that have been dumped into the sea from the beginning of the twentieth century. The quarries here used to sell the gabbro crushed into roadstone, and there's a pier at Dean Point from which barges were loaded for the stone to be shipped.

As we emerge from the dark shelter of the trees by the narrow path beside the stream toward Godrevy cove, below the village of Rosenithon, the prospect of the open sea draws me forward, and suddenly I hear its voice.

The sound of the sea always jumps at me. I hear nothing of it and then its gravelly voice reaches me very clearly, as though a curtain has been lifted.

I push through the reeds that fringe the shingle and walk straight to the water's edge. I find it strange to stop. I don't know what to do with myself. We sweep up to the edge of the land, but I want to keep on walking though I feel fatigue. I don't want to stop. It's a lonely shingly place, between two quarries (one working, one suspended). Just as at our starting point it is beyond sight of habitation.

We build a wake fire between the shingle and the reeds. As the flames kindle brightness into the sodden air, sea lice rush toward it to immolate themselves. Before long the fire is encircled by a pink cooked drift of sea-lice. Sometimes one pops. Sparks menace the walkers who form a tight circle around the fire, hopelessly drying facets of themselves in the blowing rain.

This ancient festival of a dawn fire at midsummer was first described by Dr William Borlase in 1754 in his book *Antiquities of Cornwall* – where I came across the word 'Troheaul'.

'In Cornwall, the festival Fires, called Bonfires, are kindled on the Eve of St. John the Baptist and St. Peter's Day; and Midsummer is thence, in the Cornish tongue, called 'Goluan,' which signifies both light and rejoicing. At these Fires the Cornish attend with lighted torches, tarr'd and pitch'd at the end, and make their perambulations round their Fires, and go from village to village carrying their torches before them; and this is certainly the remains of the Druid superstition.'

The sea is quiet, even the rain is noiseless. I walk to the strand, where the shell-line lies on the shingle, and look back at the fence of bodies enclosing the fire.

There is no texture as dawn comes, just blackness moving into a dull grey, shifting to lighter tones, and finally tinges of colour leaking very slowly back into the land and the air. Behind Dean Quarry returning colour vibrates in the air, but the sky is undifferentiated. The rain carries on falling out of the sky in the same soft relentless way as it has all night. I look at my boots, which I can see properly for the first time since Predannack. I am surprised to see grass seeds clogging the cleats.

A clear sharp sound cuts through the hovering blue dimness. A bird in the scrub on the shoulder of the quarry spoils flies up with a sudden movement. It sings a few notes - not a song - but just a few bright notes that seem to pierce a spell of stasis. Perhaps we were waiting for a signal or a sign. Day break is so slow that we could take no cue from the dawn sky or sea. Strangely, and without talking or pointing it out, the notes from the bird become a curfew whistle to end our vigil at the fire. Without saying much we gathered ourselves up, left the fire burning and with one assent we walked away.

Characters:

Abigail Reynolds: an artist based in St Just, Penwith, voiced by herself

Sir Ferrers Vyvyan: the thirteenth Baronet of Trelowarren, a thousand-acre estate on the Lizard, voiced by himself

Victoria Vyvyan, voiced by herself

Riddley Walker: a fictional character in the eponymous novel by Russell Hoban, voiced by walker Ben Sanderson

Sound design and voice recording: Lucy Frears

Additional sound design and effects: Neil Rose

Solstice night recording: Chris Barstow

Text editors: Patrick Langley and Ellen Mara De Wachter

Producer: Teresa Gleadowe

Bibliography:

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Alfred Watkins, *'The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones'*, 1925

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