

Walking into Life

In recent years, the limits and fallibility of medical science rendered the use of my legs increasingly difficult. Initially I thought that my greatest sense of loss would be reserved for dancing. But whilst music did make my muscles twitch with the memory of dance, it was walking that I most keenly came to miss.

Walking has always afforded me a freedom ironically more related to my mental state than any physical confines. During times of grief or discontent I have often surrendered myself to my feet and, somewhere along the vast distances they have carried me, I have shifted imperceptibly from thinking to simply being. In the cheeky banter of lorikeets, the fragrances drifting from proud suburban gardens, the play of light and shadow beneath canopies of trees, and the conversations with passers-by (our mutual anonymity granting us the gift of fewer words, but greater honesty), I have fiercely felt the pulse of my existence.

This is not an existence limited to the birds and trees of life. Without the speed of the bike or the carapace of the car, and crossing terrains only accessible by foot, walking has unveiled and expanded life for me. I have smelt the lives of those residing in parks and gutted buildings, heard the almost inaudible soliloquy of the crinkled woman, and seen how so many broken footpaths and steps segregate wheelchair users. So often on my walks I have been challenged to bear witness, to feel, to act. That's the thing about walking: it invites us – perhaps at times even forces us - to more intimately engage with our world.

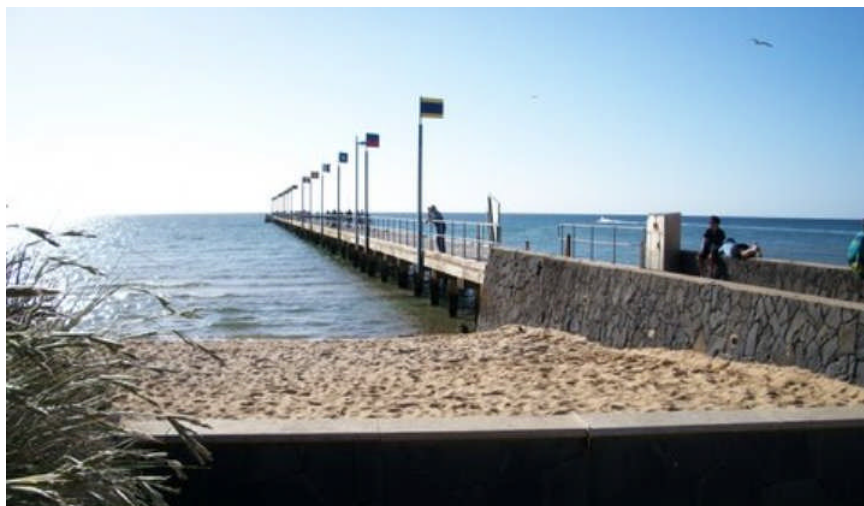


And so it is that one particular walk has continued to, in the words of William Wordsworth, 'flash upon that inward eye', since I became housebound. As I now begin the process of recovery, I recall this walk with rising anticipation.



It begins humbly, in a typical residential Frankston street: a German shepherd trapped in a Jack Russell's body is making his presence known as I pass his low fence, and another brick veneer home is being razed for half a dozen two-storey townhouses. At the top of the final street there is a nondescript, shadowy laneway. I want to savour this, so slow down upon entry.

I feel like a trespasser. It is a rare patch of public space on which I now stand, amongst the mansions of Olivers Hill. From up here, the bay seems as vast as the open ocean. From up here, the bay glistens, twinkles and blinds with magnificence.



But as the sun begins its descent, a thin streak of brown stretching out from the shore catches my eye. It is throbbing with life: people of all classes and colours and creeds and ages are out there, walking the weathered planks of wood to farewell the sun.

I look about me at the silent towers of glass and beige. And then I hurry down the hill.

- Sarah Mayes