

SAMPLER

Walk Song

ALSO BY DAVID HERD

POETRY

Through

Outwith

All Just

Mandelson! Mandelson! A Memoir

PROSE

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David Herd

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Prologue

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This prologue is not a poem
It is an act of welcome
It announces
That people present
Reject the terms
Of a debate that criminalizes
Human movement
It is a declaration this night
In Shepherdswell
Of solidarity.

It says that we have started –
That we are starting out –
That by the oldest action
Which is listening to tales
That other people tell
Of others
Told by others
We set out to make a language
That opens politics
Establishes belonging
Where a person dwells.
Where they are now
Which is to say
Where we are now
Walking
In solidarity
Along an ancient track
That we come back to the geography of it
North of Dover
That where the language starts
Now longen folk to goon
On this pilgrimage.

In June not April
And with the sweet showers far behind us
Though with the birds singing
And people sleeping
With open eye
And what we long for
Is to hear each other's tales
And to tell them again
As told by some hath holpen
Walking
So priketh him nature
Not believing the stories
Our officials tell.
Because we know too much
About what goes unsaid
And what we choose to walk for
Is the possibility of trust
In language
To hear the unsaid spoken
And then repeated
Made
Unambiguous and loud
Set out over a landscape gathered
Step by step
As by virtue of walking which
We call our commons
Every sap vessel bathed in moisture
And what that commons calls for
Is what these stories sound.

Of crossing
For to seken straunge strondes

In moments of emergency
When that they were seeked
Of tribunals
Where the unsaid goes unspoken
Lines of questioning
No official has written down
People present by video
Answers mistranslated
As outside by the station
At the dead of morning
As the young sun rises
Woken in their homes
People are picked up and detained.
Routinely and
Arbitrarily
In every holt and heeth
Under the sun while
Smale foweles maken melodye
And why we walk is
To make a spectacle of welcome
This political carnival
Across the Weald of Kent
People circulating
Making music
Listening to stories
People urgently need said.

And said
And said again
Stories of the new geography
Stories of arrival
Of unaccompanied minors

Of people picked up and detained
Of process
And mistranslation
Networks of visitors and friends
This new language we ask for
Forming
Strung out
Along the North Downs Way.

Which makes it a question of scale.
Consider just
The scale
Of the undertaking
Chaucer's pilgrims crossing
Palatye and Turkye and Ruce
Across the Grete See
Which is the Mediterranean
Dark these days
Not like wine
Crossing through Flaundres
Through Artoys
Crossing the water at Pycardie.
And all the while finding stories
And then all of them
Gathering one night in London
And so the Host says
Since we're walking
Why don't we tell each other tales
And so they do
Out of Southwark
And what comes of Southwark
Is a whole new language

Of travel and assembly and curiosity
And welcome.

To make his English sweete.
That's why Chaucer told his tales.
How badly we need English
To be made sweet again
Rendered hostile by act of law
So that even friendship is barely possible –
There as this lord was kepere of the celle –
So we might actually talk
And in talking
Come to understand the journey –
Tender
Says the poet
To Canterbury they wende

Tender
To hold
From the French
Tendre
From the English
For listening
To a story as it is said
To attend
Tendre
And then writing it down
Because it isn't written
Because the hearings
In the British immigration system
Are not courts
Of record.

So there are no stories
And people leave
As if there never had been
Stories
And so nobody
Who reaches a verdict
Has a real story
With which to contend
So now we are telling them
En masse
And people will listen
In sondry londes
And specially
From every shires ende.

But this prologue is not a poem
It is an act of introduction
Bathed every veyne in swich licour
And all the introduction can do
Is set the tone
Albeit the tone
Is everything
And the tone is welcoming
And the tone is celebratory
And the tone is courteous
And the tone is real
And every step sets out a demand
And every demand is urgent
And what we call for
Is an end
To this inhuman discourse.

And so we stop this night

And the Host steps up
And he says
Listen to this story
Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
And the room goes quiet
And a voice starts up
And then the language
Alters
Sweet
Tender
Perced to the roote.

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I Recall It was Different

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