

Abstract

Introduction

Two writers, stuck in our university offices, decide to take our thoughts “for a walk” across the page. Writing from Middlesbrough, United Kingdom, and Auckland, New Zealand, we are separated by 18,000 kilometres and 11 hours, and yet here, on the page, our paths meet. How does walking, imaginary or real, affect our thinking? How do the environments through which we move, and the things we see along the way, influence our writing? What role do rhythm and pace play in the process? We invite you to join us on two short walks that reflect on our shared challenges as writers from two different strands of writing studies. Perhaps our paths will intersect, or even overlap, with yours somewhere? Ultimately, we aim to find out what happens when we leave our academic baggage behind, side-stepping dense theoretical arguments and comprehensive literature reviews for a creative-critical exploration.

**Evija:** Let’s admit it, Sophie—I’m stuck. I’ve spent half a day in front of this computer but have hardly typed a line. It’s not just writing. It’s my thinking. I feel like my mind is weighed down by the clutter of thoughts that lead nowhere.

Look at my surroundings. My office is crammed with stuff. So many thoughts buried under piles of paper, insisting on their place in the work in which they so obviously do not belong. I also can’t help but feel the magnetic pull of others’ ideas from all the books around me. Each thought, each reference, fights for its place in my work. What an unbearable intertextual mess...

**Sophie:** I think that everyone who has ever tried to write knows exactly what these moments feel like. We can feel so *lost*, so *stuck* and *blocked*. Have you ever noticed that the words that we use about these feelings are intensely visceral? Perhaps that’s why, when the words won’t come, so many of us find it helpful to get up and move our bodies. Evija, shall we leave our desks behind for a while and go for a walk? Would you like to join me?

**E:** Most certainly! Apparently, Friedrich Nietzsche loved to take his mind for a walk (Gros). Ideas, born among books, says Frédéric Gros, “exude the stuffy odour of libraries” (18). Gros describes such books as “grey”: “overloaded with quotations, references, footnotes, explocatory prudence, indefinite refutations” (19). They fail to say anything new and are “crammed”, “stuffed”, and “weighed down”; they are “born of a compilation of the other books” (Gros 19) so also bear their weight. Essentially, we are told, we should think of the books we are writing as “expression[s] of [our] physiology” (Gros 19). If we are shriveled, stuck, stooped, tense, and tired, so also are our thoughts. Therefore, in order to make your thoughts breathe, walk, and even “dance”, says Nietzsche, you should go outdoors, go up in the mountains.

**S:** As I read what you’ve written here, Evija, I feel as if I’m walking amongst your thoughts, both here on the screen and in my imagination. Sometimes, I’m in perfect step with you. At other times, I want to interrupt, tug on your sleeve and point, and say “Look! Have you seen this, just up ahead?”

**E:** That’s the value of companionship on the road. A shared conversation on the move can lead to a transformation of thought, a *conversion*, as in the Biblical stories of the roads to Emmaus and Damascus. In fact, we tested the power of walking and talking in rural settings in a series of experimental events organised for academics in Auckland, New Zealand, throughout 2017 (see our blog post on *Writing, Writing Everywhere* website). It appeared to work very well for writers who had either been “stuck” or in the early stages of drafting. Those who were looking to structure existing thoughts were better off staying put. But walking and talking is an entire other topic (see Anderson) that we should discuss in more depth some other time.

Anyway, you’ve brought us to what looks like a forest. Is this where you want us to go?

A Walk “into the Woods,” or Getting in the Thick of Free-Writing

**S:** Yes, just follow me. I often walk in the woods close to where I live. Of course, going “into the woods” is itself a metaphor, rich with fairy-tale connotations about creativity. The woods are full of darkness and danger, grandmother’s cottage, wild beasts, witches, poisonous fruits. The woods are where traps are laid, where children wander and get lost, where enchantments befall us. But humans have always been seduced by the woods and what lies in wait there (Maitland). In Jungian terms, losing oneself in darkness is a rite of initiation. By stepping into the woods, we surrender to not knowing, to walking off the path and into the depths of our imagination. I dare you to do that, right now!

**E:** Letting go is not always easy. I keep wanting to respond to your claim by adding scholarly references to important work on the topic. I want to mention the father of the essay, Michel de Montaigne, for whom this form of writing was but “an attempt” (from Old French, “*essa*”) to place himself in this world, a philosophical and literary adventure that stood very far from the rigidly structured academic essay of the present day (Sturm). We’ve forgotten that writing is a risky undertaking, an exploration of uncharted terrains (Sturm).

**S:** Yes, and in academic thinking, we’re always afraid to ramble. But perhaps rambling is exactly what we need to do. Perhaps we need to start walking without knowing where we’re going ... and see where it takes us.

**E:** Indeed. Instead of going on writing retreats, academics should be sent “into the woods”, where their main task would be to get lost before they even start to think.

**S:** *Into the Woods*, a reality TV show for academics? But seriously, maybe there is something about walking into the woods—or a landscape different from our habitual one—that symbolises a shift in feeling-state. When I walk into the woods, I purposely place myself in a different world. My senses are heightened. I become acutely aware of each tiny sound—the ticking of the leaves, the wind, the birdsong, the crunch of my feet, the pounding of the blood in my ears. I become less aware of all the difficult parts of myself, my troubles, my stuckness, what weighs on me so heavily.

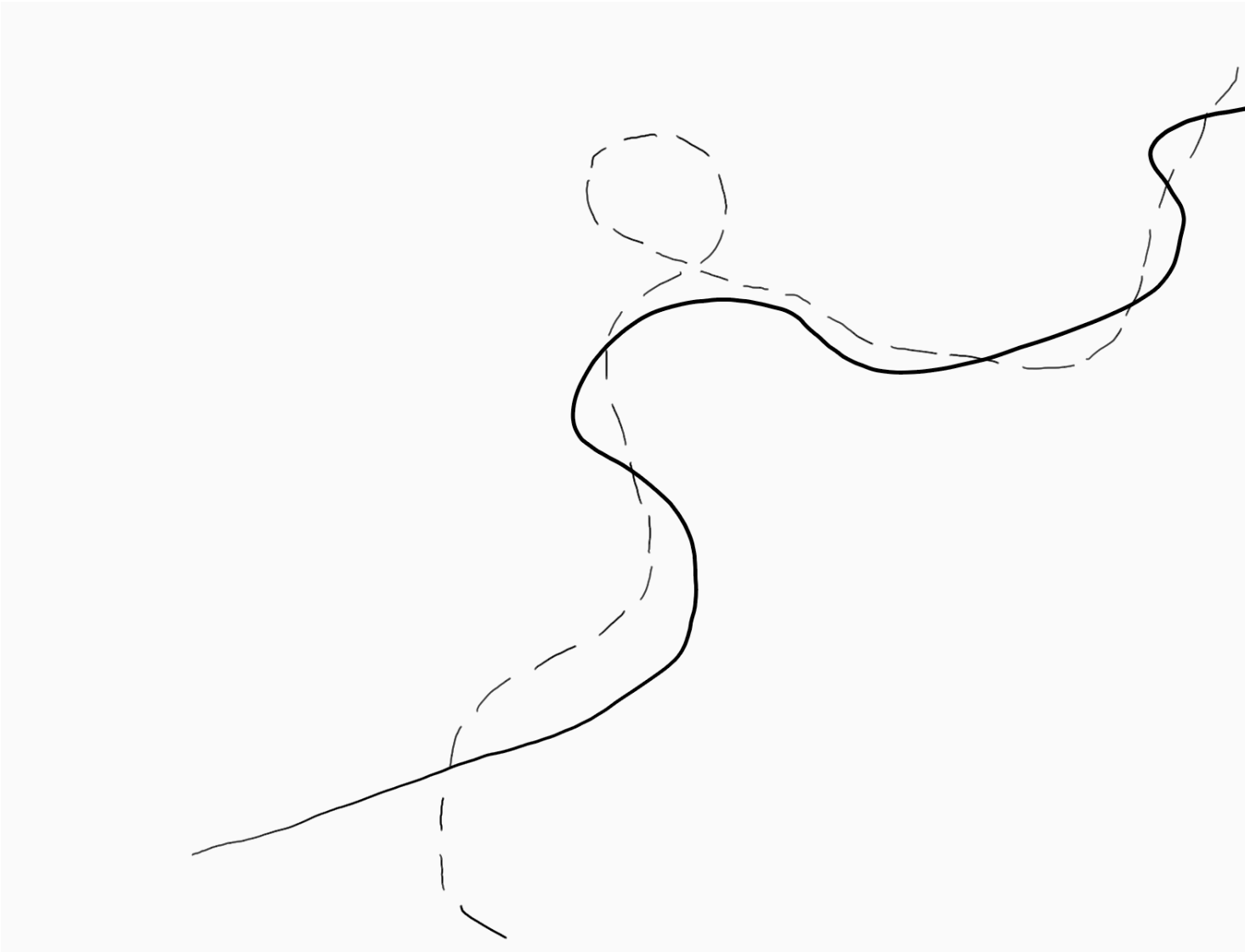
It seems to me that there is a parallel here with a state of consciousness or awareness famously described by the psychologist of optimal experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, as “flow”. In flow, “the loss of a sense of self separate from the world around it is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of union with the environment” (Csikszentmihalyi 63), together with pleasure in movement and in the sensory experience of seeing the world. So flow might be one way of thinking about my lived experience of walking in the woods.

But this shift has also been described by the psychotherapist Marion Milner as a shift from “narrow thinking” into a “wider” way of looking, listening, feeling, and moving—a feeling state that Milner called the “fat feeling”. She identified this “fat feeling” as characteristic of moments when she experienced intense delight (Milner 15) and she began to experiment with ways in which she could practice it more purposefully.

In this sense, walking is a kind of “trick” that I can play upon myself. The shift from office to woods, from sitting at my desk to moving through the world, triggers a shift from preoccupation with the “head stuff” of academic work and into a more felt, bodily way of experiencing. Walking helps me to “get out of my head.”

**E:** So wandering through this thicket becomes a kind of free writing?

**S:** Yes, free writing is like “taking a line for a walk” on the page, words that the Swiss-German artist Paul Klee famously attributed to drawing (Klee 105; see also Raymond). It’s what we’re doing here, wouldn’t you say?



Two Lines of Walking: A drawing by Evija.

**E:** Yes—and we don’t know where this walk will lead us. I’m thinking of the many times I have propelled myself into meaningful writing by simply letting the hand do its work and produce written characters on the screen or page. Initially, it looks like nonsense. Then, meaning and order start to emerge.

**S:** Yes, my suggestion is that walking—like writing—frees us up, connects us with the bodily, felt, and pleasurable aspects of the writing process. We need this opportunity to meander, go off at tangents...

**E:** So what qualities do free writing and walking have in common? What is helpful about each of these activities?

**S:** A first guess might be that free writing and walking make use of rhythm.

Linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls the sound, rhythm, and texture of language the “semiotic”. For Kristeva, the “semiotic” (the realm of bodily drives and affects, rhythms, pre-verbal babble) and the “symbolic” (the realm of prescribed language, linguistic structure, grammar, and judgment) do not exist in rigid opposition to one another. Instead, they form a continuum which she calls “*signifiance*” or signification (Kristeva 22), a “dialectic” (24) of making meaning.

According to Kristeva, even the smallest element of symbolic meaning, the phoneme, is involved in "rhythmic, intonational repetitions" (103) so that, as we order phonemes into words and words into sentences, our language pulses with the operations of our bodily, instinctual drives. Kristeva thinks in terms of an "explosion of the semiotic in the symbolic" (69).

**E:** An explosion. I like that!

**S:** Me too.

My theory is that, by letting go into that rhythm a little, we're enabling ourselves to access some of the pre-verbal force that Kristeva talks about.

**E:** So the rhythm of walking helps us to connect with the rhythmic qualities of the semiotic?

**S:** Exactly. We might say that a lot of academic writing tends to privilege the symbolic—both in terms of the style we choose and the way that we structure our arguments.

**E:** And academic convention requires that we make more references here. For example, as we're discussing "free writing", we could cite Ken Macrorie or Peter Elbow, the two grandfathers of the method. Or we might scaffold our talks about collaborative writing as a means of scholarly inquiry, with the work of Laurel Richardson or another authority in the field.

**S:** Yes, and all of this is an important part of academic practice, of course. But perhaps when we give ourselves permission to ramble and meander, to loosen up the relationships between what we feel and what we say, we move along the continuum of meaning-making towards the more felt and bodily, and away from the received and prescribed.

...

**S:** And I've put an ellipsis there to mark that we are moving into another kind of space now. We're coming to a clearing in the woods. Because at some point in our rambling, we might want to pause and make a few suggestions. Perhaps we come to a clearing, like this one here. We sit down for a while and collect our thoughts.

**E:** Yes. Let's sit down. And, while you're resting, let me tell you what this "collecting of thoughts" reminds me of.

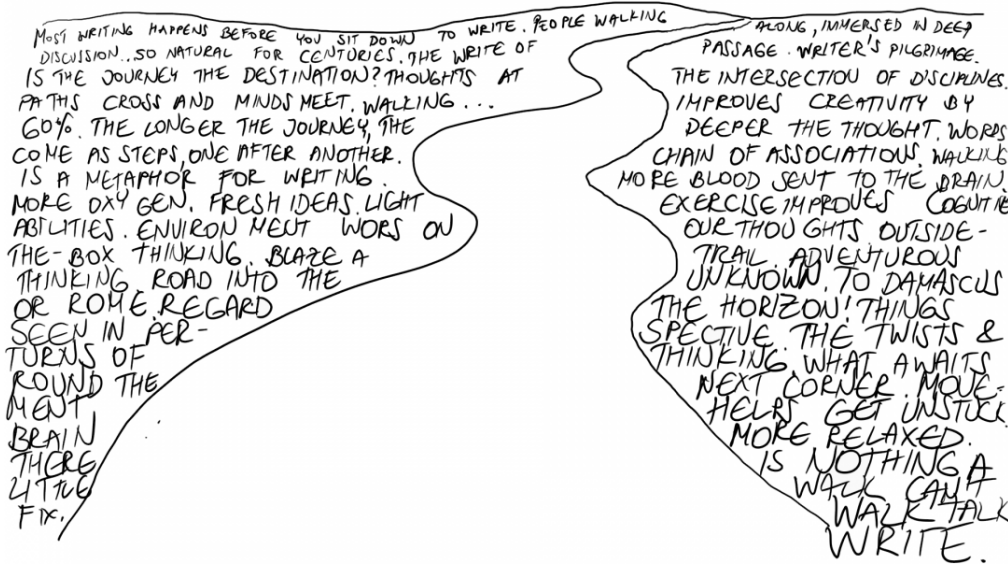
I'm thinking that we don't necessarily need to go anywhere to get away from our particular state of mind. A shared cup of coffee or a conversation can have the same effect. Much has already been said about the effects of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs on writing; all rather harmful ways of going "on a trip" (Laing; Klein).

In our case, it's the blank pages of a shared Google Doc that has brought us together, collecting our thoughts on walking and moving us into a different realm, a new world of exciting and strange ideas to be explored. And the idea of mapping out this space by gradually filling its pages with words sets our minds on a journey.

**S:** That's interesting. The choreographer Twyla Tharp talks about the power of ritual in creating this shift for us into a creative or flow state. It could be lighting a candle or drinking a glass of water. There is a moment when something "clicks", and we enter the world of creativity.

**E:** Yes, a thing can act as a portal or gateway. And, as I want to show you, the things in the landscape that we walk through can help us to enter imaginary realms.

So can I take you for a little walk now? See that winding country road leading through open fields and rolling hills? That's where we're going to start.



A publicity image, drawn by Evija, for Walking Talking Writing events for academics, organised at the University of Auckland in 2017.

#### A Walk "through the Countryside", or Traversing the Landscape of Thoughts

**E:** Sophie, you spoke earlier about the way that experiencing yourself in relation to the environment is important for opening up your imagination. For example, just allowing yourself to be in the woods and noticing how the space pulsates around you is enough to awaken your bodily awareness.

But let's take a stroll along this road and let me explain to you what's happening for me. You see, I find the woods too distracting and stimulating. When I'm stuck, I crave openness and space like this landscape that we're walking through right now.

**S:** Too much detail, too many things, overwhelm you?

**E:** Exactly. Here, where the landscape is simple and spacious, my thoughts can breathe. Ideas quietly graze as I move through them. The country road is under my feet and I know exactly where I'm heading – beyond that horizon line in the distance... I need to be able to look far into that hazy distance to get my sense of seeing things "in depth."

All this makes me think of a study by Mia Keinänen in which she surveyed nine Norwegian academics who habitually walk to think (Keinänen). Based on their personal observations, the resulting article provides interesting material about the importance of walking—its rhythm, environment, and so on—on one's thinking. For one of the academics, being able to see landmarks and thoughts in perspective was the key to being able to see ideas in new ways. There is a "landscape of thinking", in which thinking becomes a place and environment is a process.

For another participant in the study, thoughts become objects populating the landscape. The thinker walks through these object-thoughts, mapping out their connections, pulling some ideas closer, pushing others further away, as if moving through a 3D computer game.

**S:** Hmm. I too think that we tend to project not only thoughts but also the emotions that we ourselves might be experiencing onto the objects around us. The literary critic Suzanne Nalbantian describes this as the creation of "aesthetic objects", a "mythopoetic" process by which material objects in the external world "change their status from real to 'aesthetic' objects" and begin to function as "anchors or receptacles for subjectivity" (Nalbantian 54).

Nalbantian uses examples such as Proust's madeleine or Woolf's lighthouse to illustrate the ways in which authors of autobiographical fiction invest the objects around them with a particular psychic value or feeling-tone.

For me, this might be a tree, or a fallen leaf on the path. For you, Evija, it could be the horizon, or an open field or a vague object, half-perceived in the distance.

**E:** So there's a kind of equivalence between what we're feeling and what we're noticing?

**S:** Yes. And it works the other way around too. What we're noticing affects our feelings and thoughts. And perhaps it's really about finding and knowing what works best for us—the landscape that is the best fit for how we want to feel...

**E:** Or how we want to think. Or write.

**S:** That's it. Of course, metaphor is another way of describing this process. When we create a metaphor, we bring together a feeling or memory inside us with an object in the outside world. The feeling that we carry within us right now finds perfect form in the shape of this particular hillside. A thought is this pebble. A memory is that cloud...

**E:** That's the method of loci, which Mia Keinänen also refers to (600) in her article about the walking-thinking Norwegian academics. By projecting one's learnt knowledge onto a physical landscape, one is able to better navigate ideas.

**S:** Although I can't help thinking that's all a little cerebral. For me, the process is more immediate and felt. But I'm sure we're talking about something very similar...

**E:** Well, the anthropologist Tim Ingold, who has written a great deal on walking, in his article "Ways of Mind-Walking: Reading, Writing, Painting" urges us to rethink what imagination might be and the ways that it might relate to the physical environment, our movement through it, and our vision. He quotes James Elkins's suggestion (in Ingold 15-16) that true "seeing" involves workings of both the eye and the mind in bringing forth images.

But Ingold questions the very notion of imagination as a place inhabited by images. From derelict houses, barren fields and crossroads, to trees, stray dogs, and other people, the images we see around us do not represent "the forms of things in the world" (Ingold 16). Instead, they are gateways and "place-holders" for the truer essence of things they seem to represent (16).

**S:** There's that idea of the thing acting as a gateway or portal again...

**E:** Yes, images—like the ruins of that windmill over there—do not "stand for things" but help us experientially "find" those things (Ingold 16). This is one of the purposes of art, which, instead of giving us representations of things in the world, offers us something which is *like* the things in the world (16)—i.e., experiences.

But as we walk, and notice the objects around us, are there specific qualities about the objects themselves that make this process—what you call "projection"—more or less difficult for us?



A drawing by Latvian artist Māris Subačs (2016). The text on the image says: "Clouds slowly moving." Publicity image for Subačs's exhibition "Baltā Istaba" (The White Room), taken from Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji, <https://www.ism.lv/>.

**S:** Well, let's circle back now—on the road and on the page. We've talked about the way that you need wide, open spaces, whereas I find myself responding to a range of different environments in different ways. How do you feel now, as we pause here and begin to retrace our steps?

**E:** How do I feel? I'm not sure. Right now, I'm thinking about the way that I respond to art.

For example, I would say that life-like images of physical objects in this world (e.g., a realistic painting of a vase with flowers) are harder to perceive with my mind's eye than, let's say, of an abstract painting. I don't want to be too tied to the surface details and physicality of the world.

What I see in a picture is not the representation of the vase and flowers; what I see are forms that the "inner life force", to use Ingold's term, has taken to express itself through (*vaseness, floweriness*). The more abstract the image, the more of the symbolic or the imaginary it can contain. (Consider the traditional Aboriginal art, as Ingold invites, or the line drawings of Latvian artist Māris Subačs, as I suggest, depicted above.) Things we can observe in this world, says Ingold, are but "outward, sensible forms" that "give shape to the inner generative impulse that is life itself" (17). (This comes from the underlying belief that the phenomenal world itself is all "figmented" (Ingold 17, referring to literary scholar Mary Carruthers).)

**S:** And, interestingly, I don't recognise this at all! My experiencing of the objects around me feels very different. That tree, this pine cone in my hand, the solidity of this physical form is very helpful in crystallising something that I'm feeling. I enjoy looking at abstract paintings too. I can imagine myself into them. But the thing-ness of things is also deeply satisfying, especially if I can also touch, taste, smell, hold the thing itself.

The poet Selima Hill goes for a walk in order to gather objects in a Tupperware box: "a dead butterfly, a yellow pebble, a scrap of blue paper, an empty condom packet." Later she places an object from these "Tupperware treasures" on her writing desk and uses it "to focus on the kernel of the poem", concentrating on it "to select the fragments and images she needs" (Taylor). This resonates with me.

**E:** So, to summarise, walking seems to have something to do with seeing, for both of us.

**S:** Yes, and not just seeing but also feeling and experiencing, with all of our senses.

**E:** OK. And walking like appreciating art or writing or reading, has the capacity to take us beyond what shows at surface level, and so a step closer to the "truer" expression of life, to paraphrase Ingold.

**S:** Yes, and the expression that Ingold calls more "true" is what Kristeva would say is the semiotic, the other-than-meaning, the felt and bodily, always bubbling beneath the surface.

**E:** True, true. And although Ingold here doesn't say how walking facilitates this kind of seeing and experiencing, perhaps we can make some suggestions here.

You focused on the rhythm of walking and thinking/writing earlier. But I'm equally intrigued by the effects of *speed*.

**S:** That resonates for me too. I need to be able to slow down and really experience the world around me.

**E:** Well, did you know that there are scientific studies that suggest a correlation between the speed of walking and the speed of thinking (Jabr; Opezzo and Schwartz)? The pace of walking, as the movement of our bodies through space, sets a particular temporal relationship with the objects we move past. In turn, this affects our "thinking time", and our thinking about abstract ideas (Cuclenaere 127, referring to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's ideas).

**S:** That makes sense to me. I noticed that when we were walking through the woods, we had slowed right down and then, as we reached the open road, you seemed to want to go much faster than me...

**E:** Yes, at a steady pace. That's perhaps not surprising. Because it seems that the speed of our walking is intimately connected with our vision. So if I'm moving through a landscape in which I'm fully immersed, I'm unable to take in everything around me. I choose to rest my eyes on a few select points of interest.

**S:** Or on the horizon...

**E:** Yes. The path that leads through an open field allows me to rest my eyes on the distant horizon. I register the patterns of fields and houses; and perhaps I catch sight of the trees in my peripheral vision. The detailed imagery, if any, gets reduced to geometrical figures and lines.

The challenge is to find the right balance between the stimuli provided by the external world and the speed of movement through it.

**S:** So the pace of walking can enable us to see things in a certain way. For you, this is moving quickly, seeing things vaguely, fragmentally and selectively. For me, it's an opportunity to take my time, find my own rhythm, to slow down and weigh a thought or a thing.

I think I'm probably the kind of walker who stops to pick up sticks and shells, and curious stones. I love the rhythm of moving but it isn't necessarily fast movement. Perhaps you're a speed walker and I'm a Rambler?

**E:** I think both the pace and the rhythm are of equal importance. The movement can be so monotonous that it becomes a meditative process, in which I lose myself. Then, what matters is no longer the destination but the journey itself. It's like...

**S:** Evija! Stop for a moment! Over here! Look at this!

**E:** You know, that actually broke my train of thought.

**S:** I'm sorry... I couldn't resist. But Evija, we've arrived at the entrance to the woods again.

**E:** And the light's fading... I should get back to the office.

**S:** Yes, but this time, we can choose which way to go: through the trees and into the half-dark of my creative subconscious or across the wide, open spaces of your imagination.

**E:** And will we walk slowly—or at speed? There's still so much to say. There are other landscapes and pathways—and pages—that we haven't even explored yet.

**S:** But I don't want to stop. I want to keep walking with you.

**E:** Indeed, Sophie, writing is a walk that never ends.

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