

The Public Footpath

The public footpath, unobtrusive alley
Fits between the houses of grand design
Facades and gardens in prettiest pose
Cultivated grass beams at broad extent
Managed lawns and glowing front doors
Mean only to greet a chosen few
Into this, that private domain
Outward portrayal of domiciliary pride
Squeezed between all that, the public footpath
Narrow channel formed of grit, sticks and weeds
A portal to the unknown so fair to miss
With a mere postage stamp sign painted whiter
Maybe you'd have thought yourself fooled, led down some soul's forbidden
 garden path
Not at all, you are welcome
While these home fronts face out to the world
The footpath flows in opposite fashion
Near hidden from sight
Its back to the road
No cars, fumes or bustle permitted round here
The route is as dark and as hemmed in as you like
Stench of dust, fence preserver,
Outside, hayfever
Enter yourself upon a journey, on a little earth stream
This humble tributary to the tarmac torrent behind
Ahead instead as you wander further lies;
Backstage
The trail winds cagey, claustrophobic at first
Secretive and dark, challenging perseverance of exploration
This scrawny dot line on the paper of your map
Too insignificant for a smart phone to pay heed
This dank avenue, leading off into nowhere
Barely seen or encountered
Speaks softly and claims
To knot the whole landscape together
But our footpath leads to no mountains, no valleys, nor peaks
It goes past no moor, nor crag, or no cliff
No waterfall, or forest, no sand dunes you'll see
National parks, natural wonders, they don't grow on trees
Here in its place we find
That eventually a brook of stones intersects a beck of water
Familiar sight,
This trickle, lifeblood of a fledgling village so long ago
More serene, more alive, more holy.
You've a dialogue with it for the first time
Quiet now, nature is talking

Now there are the insects bustling by
Birds flutter incredulously at a human presence
And even oft unseen fish might catch an eye
Here is a clue of the calm that can exist beyond
A place of pause from one's stresses and strains.
And when you stop to think
The stream skips on
The public footpath broaches the gateway
Backstage is field and meadow, an original production team
Speech of man, woman, child, and machine
Distant whispers on a cool embracing breeze
Behold here the realm of the farmers and the dog walkers
Treasure trove of the footpath
It wanders through the county
From the inside-out view of disparate garden streets' back
Across the plain it wanders to horizon's edge
Where even obscure distant hamlets and towns are spied as specks
And beyond dull far-off smudge of wold
Thought before only to be reached by vehicular power
It seems you've glitched to a world beyond
Where daily life can be detected only at obscure distance
Or heard with the rush of a nearby motorway
But both seem never truly there
Ambling through on a track made with tractor tyres
We, companion of the flies, the birds and the telegraph lines
So bizarre for heavy apparatus to exist in this same plane
As the crops and grasses wave in the wind
The leaves of trees the only score
Here is a place where peace may pervade
Where the mind wanders as well as the feet
Here you find lost
Or uncover ways forward where one did not expect to tread
A place to forget or to contemplate
To bask or to venture.
The public footpath is open,
For everyone
To lead themselves away
From everyone else.

John Freeman, 2020