Torbjørn Ekelund

***The History of Paths. A Journey on Foot (2018)***

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**(Photo credit: Jørn H. Moen)**

***“THE STORY OF FOOTPATHS IS THE STORY OF US”***

The first thing humans did when they climbed down from the trees of the African savannah, 200,000 years ago, was move about. We were nomadic, we had no concept of residence. We walked, and from that the first footpaths emerged.

Footpaths came before everything else, before tools, fire, religions and the formation of society. Footpaths appeared and vanished, and new ones came along; myriads of stories, spun around the earth like the thread in a ball of yarn.

“I dream about footpaths. How many have I walked? Hundreds, maybe thousands. I remember them all, clearer than almost everything else I’ve seen or experienced, better than people I’ve ever met.”

So begins this original and magnificent book. The author takes you on a fascinating journey from the first humans wandering across Europe, after the last ice age, up until present day organized hiking trails. History of Trails leads you through philosophy, biology, literature, archeology and mythology. It’s about movement and residence, migration and shortcuts; about the fascinating migratory routes of birds and animals, and our inherent need to relocate; and also about what has been lost in an age where we all sit in offices, and drive cars, and navigate using GPS on our smartphones.

Excerpt from *The History of Paths. A Journey on Foot.*

by Torbjørn Ekelund

Translation by Becky L. Crook

We used to be nomads. We wandered, never staying in the same place for long. The world lay open and undiscovered, there were no borders. We could walk in any direction, follow our will, explore new lands.

Now we are sedentary. We live our lives sitting down. Drive in the car to the store. Fly if we wish to travel a longer distance. We have pizza delivered to our door and buy automatic lawn mowers, robots that do the job for us while we sit sunning and thinking about more pressing things than mowing the lawn.

 The journey has lost its original purpose. It is no longer an essential undertaking for sustaining our lives, rather it has become a form of amusement and recreation. We sit down in an airplane in one corner of the world and exit the airplane in another. We are able to put enormous distances behind us without it costing us any energy, and without having any knowledge about the trails and landscapes that lie stretched beyond the cloud cover several thousand feet below us. A lot has changed and a lot has been lost when checking in at an airport is the most energy-intensive stage of a journey that relocates us from one side of the earth to the other.

 Our ability to read a landscape used to be indispensable for survival. Now we no longer require any knowledge about navigation and orienteering to get where we want to go. The path is displayed on our smartphones, our GPS, and as we walk we stare down at a lit screen and not up or ahead toward the place where we are and the path we are on. Our sense of place has become an ability we would prefer to do without. The same is true for our feeling of distances.

 Paths were the first main thoroughfares and the way in which they wind through the landscape tells us something very fundamental about the people who created them. A path’s line is never accidental. It is not the shortest way between two points but the simplest. A result of the intrinsic human inclination to choose the path of least resistance because conserving energy has been so critical for survival.

 Messengers traveled by foot on paths or carriage roads. The time it took to walk the path was secondary to the energy it required. When he finally arrived, the message may already have become outdated and possibly even untrue. “Everyone is fine here,” the letter may have said, read by a European immigrant to America from their relatives back home, though in the months that had passed since the letter was posted, many of those relatives, even the letter-writer themselves may have died of hunger, tuberculosis, scarlet fever or in childbirth.

 The was the premise for all travel. That it took time. The war might well be over by the time the messenger arrived to declare it had broken out.

The history of paths is also the history of a world on the verge of disappearing. Paths have become roads, feet have become wagons and horse carriages, the earth has become asphalt and concrete, wagons and horse carriages were replaced by cars and heavy transport, roads had to be widened, swamps drained, mountains blown up and the heathlands leveled with crushed gravel.

 The duration of a journey used to be determined by the path. Today, the landscape can be adapted and reshaped. Mountains can be blasted, wetlands can be drained, rivers can be diverted into pipes. We have eliminated space as travel’s primary condition. Time, on the other hand, is now everything.

 Paths blend into the landscape, they do not destroy anything. But roads do. Roads changed everything. They not only reshaped the original landscape, they also became a hindrance for the migration that is instinctive to the brown bear, the reindeer, the salmon, the wolf, almost all living creatures, seasonal migrants, migrations for food, their endless trek from one place to another and back again.

 The migration routes of animals were broken up by large, unpassable roadways. The seasonal routes of birds were sundered by flying metal monstrosities that suddenly dominated the airspace. The annual runs of fish in the rivers were cut off by dams and bridges. Species lost their habitats and died out.

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When I was a child, paths were a red thread running consistently throughout my life. Walking was a natural part of being, there was no other possibility. Paths were everywhere.

 I grew up and started to work in an office. The paths vanished from my life, as did movement. Signs now pointed which direction I should go. Asphalt ensured all my steps were even. Street lamps drove out the dark. Gates and curbs guided me in the right direction.

 I no longer discovered things. I no longer required a look around to find out where I was and where I wanted to go. I no longer needed to trust my own judgement and to take my own decision about the direction. A life of movement had shifted to a static one. I drove a car to get somewhere and if I wanted to go somewhere but did not have access to a car, I decided it was just as well to stay at home.

One day something happened that would change my life for the worse, as well as for the better. I interviewed an author. We sat in an office in downtown Oslo across from one another around a large, white table. The author told me about a book he had written. I tried to listen to him but suddenly it felt as if my head was no longer working, as if everything had shut down inside. I stared at the author. I could see his mouth moving but I could no longer understand what he was saying. The last thing I remember thinking was: what is going to happen to me now?

 When I woke up, I was in an ambulance. A man was speaking to me. His face hovered above me, large and blurry. I noticed he was wearing a red jacket with yellow reflective stripes. Can you hear me, the man said, can you hear me? I tried to respond but found I could not. I felt as if I was lying on the bottom of the ocean. I wanted to swim up to the man with the red jacket but he was so far away and I did not have any strength. I opened my mouth to say something. Then everything went black again.

 A few hours later I awoke in the hospital. I was lying in a bed that people would roll here and there. Nurses and doctors came and went. They told me things I did not understand and spoke in languages I did not know. They examined my head. MIR. CAT scans. Ex-rays of my entire body. They did not find anything. Everything was normal, and yet something dramatic had happened.

 I was put up in a room and slowly became myself again. My language abilities returned, my memory came back. I lay in the room for three days until a doctor came in and informed me I had developed epilepsy. There are a number of things in your life that are going to change now, said the doctor, and one of them is that you will no longer be permitted to drive a car.

 The last day at the hospital I lay thinking about this. My license of almost 30 years had been revoked. The first thing I thought was that this was going to have big practical consequences. I have heard that people who incur illnesses leading to the loss of their drivers’ licenses experience the fact that they can no longer drive a car as a heavier sentence than the illness itself. How was it going to affect me? Would my life turn into something quite different? Would I miss our old Volvo?

After I was released from the hospital, I parked the car once and for all. But what happened next amazed me, and it amazes me still. I had been given a new identity and it only took me a few days to get used to it. I was no longer a person who drove a car; I was someone who went by foot. It did not feel frustrating as I had imagined it would be, but rather liberating. I changed my habits and I didn’t miss a single thing. My tempo sank, my pulse went down and the world opened up to me in a way it had not done since I was a child.

 I walked to all the places I had to go and this is how paths returned to my life. If the path was wide and dry, the going went quickly. If it was steep and wet, it went slowly. The time it took became meaningless. Space once again became the primary factor of travel.

 There was a revelation and a relief. Suddenly I noticed paths everywhere, thoroughfares I didn’t know existed. Narrow paths across green lawns, animal paths through the woods, shortcuts through hedges, in and out of gardens, across fields and parking lots, I even discovered my own ingrained patterns of movement through my house.

 I began to try out new ways of walking. I walked rapidly, and I walked slowly. I walked with a heavy or light backpack. With big boots or with light running shoes.

 On summer vacations I walked barefoot, for the entire month of July I hardly wore anything on my feet. When the autumn returned I walked to my job with my eyes closed. It was a peculiar whim and the people I encountered must have thought I was insane, but I was not. I merely wanted to see how it felt. Without my eyesight, my attention became entirely focused on the body’s movement. I felt how my feet were working. The shift of weight from one leg to the other. How one foot landed on the heel, rolled forward over the balls of my feet, how the toes pushed off at the same moment when the other foot landed on its heel, in perfect coordination. My arms created momentum, moving in opposite tact with the legs, the left arm forward, the right leg behind in a complex interplay that held the body in balance while at the same time propelling me forward. I felt how my thigh and leg muscles pushed my body ahead, and how small muscles I didn’t know existed supported my body and contributed to a recovery of balance whenever it was needed. The human foot is comprised of 26 bones that work together in a complex interplay. I had never given them a spare thought, but now I felt I was able to recognize the movement of each and every one. My spine was erect, my head held up and my gaze fixed ahead, even if my eyes were closed.

 I went like a sleepwalker to work. I heard sounds I had never before noticed. Airplanes on their way in and out of Gardermoen airport. Cars igniting and stopping. I heard the tick from the traffic lights when pedestrians are allowed to walk. The nuance in birdsong, the distant whine of ambulance sirens. The bus stopping and heaving a sigh as its doors clapped open. I heard the dry autumn leaves rustling in the morning wind. Children on their way to school, high-pitched conversations, shuffling steps. Someone sweeping the steps in front of their house. A postman putting newspapers into mailboxes. He would lift the flap of the boxes and shove them inside, as if filled with a violent rage he had to get out. I heard the rush of the city, sounds I could not distinguish from each other, the humming of thousands of different duties, none of which had to do with walking along a sidewalk with one’s eyes closed.

I walked and walked and for every yard I put behind me, I felt the urge to walk further. I read about famous long-distance trails. The John Muir Trail in the USA. Laugavegur Trail on Iceland. The King’s Trail in Sweden. The Great Divide Trail in Canada. The South West Coast Path in England. The Goldsteig Trail in Germany. Te Araroa in New Zealand.

 In the evenings I spread out maps across the table and studied them beneath the kitchen’s yellow light. The paths curved like rivers on the maps, up into the mountains, along the uneven banks of waterways, up ridges, around swamps and across wide plains.

 It was possible I would never walk these paths. They were very long. Epic distances intended for those of tougher ilk than me. They required months to walk them from start to finish. They assumed that you had good finances at your disposal and the possibility of taking time off from work. Or that you were young enough to not be responsible for anyone other than yourself.

 But there were other ways of doing it, because paths resemble each other. They are guided by the same inherent logic, regardless of whether they are short or long, magnificent or hideous, or are in China or India, on the Russian taiga or in a forest close to Oslo. I could walk on narrow paths, old, overgrown and fresh, manicured, those I knew and those I had never explored. I could read books about paths, dive down into what literature existed on the subject. I wanted to learn more about how paths came about and why, about the nomadic people, about migration and movement, orienteering, a sense of direction and why we no longer walk.

I walked and wrote, walked and wrote, and the more I walked and the more I wrote, the clearer it became to me that the history of the path cannot be told without also telling the history of the walking human and the surrounding landscape. Paths and the landscape are inextricably bound to one another. It’s the same with humans. We understand ourselves in relation to the landscape into which we are born. More than anything else, it sets up the framework for our lives. When we move through a landscape, we are doing something that feels fundamentally full of meaning. We are moving in the way we were meant to move. Our tempo enables us to look around, take the world in, observe the shift of slowness, hear sounds, recognize smells, wind, sun and rain in our face and the purpose beneath our feet that changes as we walk.

 Paths are the story of humans who journey on foot. They have a beginning, a middle and an end. They point forward toward the journey’s end goal but also behind at all those who have taken the same path before us, and toward those who created the first track. The history of paths is the history of us. Myriads of stories about work and sustenance, the urge to explore and migration, a web spun around the earth like thread from a ball of yarn.

 These are some of those histories.

(…)

One year had passed since I parked the Volvo and started to walk. Within the year I had gradually begun to change and now that I stood on the threshold of a new spring I felt that something material had shifted. I had become a new person, or I had become a very old person, a wandering figure who had not moved forward in time but backward, toward the past and my ancestors.

 Wherever I needed to go, I went by foot. There was always a backpack on my back. I filled it with everyday items, books, things I needed at the office and other objects. There was always something I needed to transport from one place to another. Even when I didn’t need it, I nonetheless carried my backpack with me. I felt naked without the backpack. It had become a part of my body, as if I was a dromedary and the backpack was my hump.

 The winter came to an end. The light returned. The migratory birds sailed in across the land and the paths that had been lying dormant beneath three feet of snow for almost four months began once again to emerge.

 This was the moment I had been waiting for and on the first day in May, I decided it was time. The forest was saturated with the snowmelt of winter. In shady spots, the snow was still piled knee-deep, but I still decided to take the chance that I would be able to walk on the paths. Or, the path, for this time it was not just any path that I was going to walk. It was The Path, as though that was its name, written in capital letters, in definite form and, the path behind our hero, the path in my life.

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My childhood cabin is located far from civiliztion. I had never traveled to it via any other means of transportation than a car but the epilepsy now prevented me from driving there and I did not want to ask anyone for a ride. I researched whether there was any public transport that could get me there, a local bus or train, but there was not. My only alternative then was to go by foot, but I could not walk the entire way from Oslo, that would take me at least a week. Instead I decided to walk from the closest train station, which was located in the small coastal village of Larvik. From here it was still a good stretch to the cabin, but this would at least allow me to walk through empty forest areas instead of along an asphalt road full of cars.

 It was already evening by the time I packed my backpack and said goodbye to my family. I knew it would take me about an hour to walk from my home to Oslo Central Train Station, and as I walked up the last steps to the station and stood in front of the large digital screen flashing the departure and arrival times, I felt deeply satisfied to see that I had planned my time perfectly.

 I left the city on the evening’s last southbound train and when the train stopped in Larvik a few hours later, I got off. It was a wet and chilly evening. The rain made the asphalt gleam like the newly polished hood of an expensive car. Puddles mirrored light from the street lamps.

 I booked myself into a hotel. The hotel was big and vacant of guests, for all I knew I was the sole guest. I was given a keycard and found my way to the room I had reserved ahead of time. I emptied all of the contents out of my backpack and spread them out onto the floor. A windbreaker. Rain clothes and extra socks. Fleece jacket and hiking pants. A wool sweater, shorts, coffee, a cooking stove. Map and compass. A knife. A cup. A bit of food. A camera.

 I lay on the bed studying the map. Directly north of Larvik, a half hour walk from the hotel was the big lake that we had been able to see from my childhood cabin. The lake was long and narrow. It stretched from south to north. Larvik was in the south, the small cabin on the north end. The map showed a network of hiking paths through the large forest area along the east side of the lake. The paths were marked in red and led in all different directions. I didn’t recognize any of them from earlier, but I knew that if I simply headed north, they would lead me all the way to the cabin.

 I set the alarm on my mobile phone to 4:00 a.m. Before falling to sleep, I ran through my plan one last time. I would walk from sun-up to sun-down, through a forest I didn’t know and on paths I had never taken. Measured out in the terrain, the distance was no more than twelve to twenty miles. I would need to adjust my tempo to the distance I would be walking, and since I wanted to walk for at least a half day before reaching the cabin, I would need to walk very slowly. This thought had appealed to me more and more since the idea had first occurred to me a few weeks earlier. Everything in our culture is focused on the fastest, nothing is about striving to be the slowest. I felt like the foremost pioneer of walking. I planned to walk as slowly as possible for a whole day, and for all I knew I was the first person I knew who had ever had such an idea.

 This was my plan. I would start at sun-up and walk until sun-down. When I arrived at the cabin I would stay the night. The next morning, I would walk the small path. I would find out if it was still as I remembered it, if it was even there at all, or whether it had long ago been swallowed up by the surrounding landscape.

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I woke up to my alarm clock ringing. The sleep clung to me like intoxication, unwilling to let go. I reluctantly got out of bed and pulled open the curtains. It was still dark outside the hotel window but the rain had stopped. I packed my backpack and went down to reception. The receptionist seemed disappointed and amazed that the hotel’s only guest planned to check out when it was still dark. I would gladly have slept another few hours in sympathy, but I had a task to do and a forest ahead of my feet.

 I left the hotel and ambled slowly through the empty streets of Larvik. The town slept, only the gulls were on the wing. I came to a peaceful beech forest within which were the remains of an old path that I wanted to see before continuing on. The Vikings had once lived here. These mysterious warriors and their small, sturdy horses left behind paths, sunken lanes, tracks from over a thousand years ago.

 Sunken lanes, or holloways as they are also known, are distinctive walking and riding paths that stretch as far back as the year 500 B.C. They can be found all over Europe. They were given their name because the traffic on these paths was so heavy that deep grooves formed in the terrain, so deep that some people preferred walking or riding up on the embankment instead of at the base of the path.

 The Larvik beech forest is a popular hiking area. Signs with information about the history, geology and fauna of the landscape line the many paths that have been formed. I read all of them with great interest, but it was the holloway I wanted to see and after a little bit of searching, I found it. It was signposted too. If it had not been, I would have walked right past it.

 Once I had noticed it, the sunken depression along the forest floor was easy to identify. It was covered by a thick layer of rotting leaves, but it was nonetheless visible as an indentation in the terrain, seven feet wide, two feet deep. The Vikings had walked here. I pictured them, a procession of silent, filthy men with swords and shields, helmets on their heads and long, unkempt beards. I knew this was a simplified vision that perhaps did not give the Vikings the credit they deserved. I knew in reality their culture was much more diverse, but the historical fate of the Vikings has long since been sealed and they will always be known as a brutal and war-like folk.

 On the other side of the beech forest, only a few hundred yards from where I stood, was a four-lane highway and just beyond that was the big lake. The highway had recently been expanded and modernized to live up to the standards expected by today’s drivers. It was from this highway that John and I saw the lights from where we paddled on the lake one winter night thirty years earlier. Now I pictured the motorists on this early spring morning. Descendants of the Vikings, descendants of nomads, people sitting behind the wheels of their expensive cars, commuters in uniforms and suits on their way in to Oslo, to important meetings in the finance or information sectors.

 I saw the newly renovated highway between the ancient beech stems and I was overcome by a peculiar feeling. Here I stood with one foot in the past and one in the present. From a holloway to a highway in ten minutes. Vikings and financiers. One old path and one new. A thousand years’ time. Light years of evolution.

 A small gravel path led beneath the highway. I followed it and when I emerged on the other side, I saw the forests and the big lake. I walked out onto a promontory. Beams of sunlight fell on my neck and cast a gleaming, white light across the surface of the water. The city and the highway lay behind me, the landscape and the paths lay ahead. I pulled my backpack onto my back and began to walk. I felt free and happy. I was on the threshold of a small adventure, a miniature journey of discovery. I did not know where I was, but I knew where I was going. The path through the town was only a prologue. The true start of my long trip to the cabin began from this point on.

If I had lived 10,000 years ago, during the Mesolithic period, the second era of the stone age, I would have belonged to a small group of people, a clan of perhaps ten or twenty individuals. We would have been the first humans among a landscape in which no one else had ever set foot. Haphazard and ambiguous, formed by the heedless ice.

 If we had been the first people in a place such as that, what would we have done?

 We would have found a good camping spot and built a shelter. We would have made sure that our camping spot was protected from rain and wind, close to water and with a view out across the surrounding landscape. We would have looked for food, hunted and gathered. For this, we would have required weapons and some simple tools. Therefore, we would have searched for trees with which to form the shafts of arrows and the handles of axes and stones that could work as the arrowheads and axe bits. If we had managed to kill a deer, we could use the bones and horns to make additional tools. Knives and fishing hooks from the bones and fishing line and sewing thread from muscle tendons. We would have collected fuel to light a bonfire. Fire was vital in a world that was cold, even if temperatures had risen.

 We would have familiarized ourselves with the terrain and soon, just like all other living beings, would have formed habits. We would have traced the same arc each time we went out to hunt, gather, fish or collect fuel. I would have followed the others and the others would have followed me. We would have trusted in each other’s choices and decisions and soon there would have been small arteries in the terrain, paths embodying our choices and that not only simplified our movement but also showed us the way back to the camp if one of us got lost.

 We would have stayed at the camping spot for a while. When resources ran low, or when our quarry moved on, we would have broken camp and continued on. We would have taken with us the few objects we possessed, leather clothes, our spear, the fish hooks and axe. We would have continued north. Driven by self-preservation and the urge to explore, we would have analyzed the terrain and staked out a course into the unknown landscape.

 None of the paths left by humans in the stone age still exist today. None of the paths that were created before the stone ages do either, they all disappeared long ago because the landscapes in which they were formed have shifted to be unrecognizable from earthquakes, meteorites, storms, floods, volcanoes, ice ages, and continental flow. But that they have existed is a certainty, ever since the beings who comprised our earliest relatives, the so-called *Ardipithecus*, climbed down from trees on Africa’s savannahs almost six million years ago, followed by *Australopithecus*, *Homo erectus*. *Homo habilis*, *Homo florensis*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, *Homo rudolfensis*, *Homo neanderthalensis*, and finally us, *Homo sapiens*.

 From a biogenetic perspective, the *Ardithipecus* are our closest link to primates and those who took the first step on two legs, thereby heralding one of humankind’s primary advantages for existence: bipedal movement.

 Humans walk on two legs, and from an evolutionary perspective, this way of moving has proved an advantage on par with our large brains. When we started to walk upright, we freed up our arms and thereby our hands. This meant that we were now able to carry our own offspring. They no longer could or needed to walk by themselves and the group could now move more rapidly.

 For thousands of years, bipedal movement contributed to the evolution of our hands. What used to be front legs developed into sophisticated grippers with unsurpassed motor skills. The dexterity of our fingers was slowly refined to perfection. The development of fine motor skills in our fingers has been a crucial step in human evolution, allowing us to form and create advanced tools.

 Our closest relative, the chimpanzee, is also partially bipedal, but the chimpanzee nonetheless moves more often on four legs. Chimpanzees still live in trees and therefore depend first and foremost on hands that can grasp around branches and stems. There is a clear difference between our hands and those of the chimpanzee. The thumb of chimpanzees is in line with the other fingers and leans in the same direction, while our thumb is separate from the others and turns inward. This physiological trait is called an “opposable thumb” and has made us unique among species. With it, we are able to embroider a doily with intricate small loops or pull a thin line of fishing lure through the tiny eye of a hook. We can hold a pencil and write with it. We are able to brush minute details into a painting. We can develop elaborate tools and advanced microtechnology. One of the first things a newborn child does is to grasp onto its parents’ fingers with its entire hand, and when it is only six or seven months old, it learns to lift and hold an object between its thumb and index finger, an ability known in developmental terms as the “pincer grasp”.

I left the city and highway behind me and continued along the banks of the lake. The path was wide and smooth. Birdsong rose with the morning light. It rose like a symphony crescendo and unseen insect buzzed on the forest floor. I ambled along like a brooding philosopher, looked to my right and to my left, stopped, turned and then kept going. I walked so slowly that I was hardly moving. At the end of my life this is going to be my pace, so I might as well prepare for it now, I thought. I was the snail at Mistaken Point, and with every footfall, I felt happier and happier about it. How slowly can one move through a whole day, how much time can one take to cover a distance? I had thought up a brand new concept, the antithesis of competitive sports, and it made me feel proud and content.

 Time passed slowly, as time should. I got hungry. I went down to the lake and found a spot sheltered from the wind. I put the coffee onto the stove and checked my watch. It was 11. I took out the map. It showed me I had walked two and a half miles.

 This was the way I used to walk as a child, me and everyone else. We walked, stopped, turned around, walked back, kept going, rested and turned again. It was true what we told our parents when we returned too late for dinner: “I forgot the time!” we would claim, and that was just what we had done. We had no thought for the time that was passing, nor had we any thought for our destination. The non-goal-oriented manner of walking was the most natural thing in the world. To walk in a straight line seemed meaningless. To walk quickly seemed meaningless. I can still remember the feeling of trying to keep up with an adult who was in a hurry and took long strides even though my own legs were so short.

Compared to the humans who lived further south, the northern European stone age people had almost nothing. No knowledge, no written language, no maps, no simple tools. But in one ability they were at least as good as their southern relatives: their ability to navigate.

 They walked toward the ice. They moved through a barren and fruitless landscape. A stone desert that must have become increasingly meagre and increasingly colder the further north they moved. They had no idea what might meet them there, no idea that had been handed down from older members of the tribe or from other clans, nothing to prepare them for what they would face. And still they kept going.

 For the humans of the stone age, life was one great migration from birth to death. Life was a journey, not figuratively, but literally. There was no such thing as home, and thus no homesickness. There was no other method for survival than simply moving on. In *A field guide to getting lost*, Rebecca Solnit writes: “To move in such a landscape was survival, to stay in the same place suicide.”

 The term «ice age» describes a period in the history of the earth when the average temperature sank and the ice-covered regions in the north and south spread and grew, creeping toward the middle of the globe, toward the equator.

 Since its birth 4.6 billion years ago, the earth has experienced many ice ages. Large ones and small, long and short. The last ice age continued for over 100,000 years. It began between 100,000 and 50,000 years after humans began their exploration of the globe.

 Scientists assume that the ice in the northern hemisphere during the last ice age reached all the way down to Central Europe and the middle of the North American continent to about the same latitude where Frankfurt and Seattle are located today. Ice covered everything and never melted. Humans lived at the edge of the ice and in toward the equator.

 There are various theories about the origins of the first humans who came to Norway. The North Sea was a large continent that was eventually flooded during the later stone ages. Some scientists believe that humans came across the Norwegian Trench, a depression in the sea that stretches from Oslo in the east and all the way along the coast line up toward Bergen in the west. Another theory is that humans traveled to Norway coming north from Germany and Denmark, through Sweden.

 Those who came through Sweden continued moving north up along the Oslo fjord. The fjord did not look the same then as it does not. Sea level was almost 700 feet higher than it is today. The fjord was enormous, a frothing mass of icebergs pushing out toward the open sea.

 The ice melted and the ocean rose but the land masses rose even more. The weight of the ice had suppressed the crust of the earth, but when it lifted the landscape lifted as well and created the landscape we know today.

I found myself only a dozen miles or so from where the edge of the ice must have been 11,000 years ago. The landscape back then was dominated by gravel and stone. There was scant vegetation, no tall trees, nothing but scattered dwarf birches and the low dwarf willow and sea buckthorn bushes, which were both among the first forms of vegetation to come to this region.

 Not only was the landscape unfamiliar to people of the stone age, it was also undergoing massive changes. The landscape rose so quickly that it may have looked different from generation to generation. What kind of knowledge did humans have to develop in order to navigate such a shifting landscape? What kinds of knowledge did they have to pass on to their children to help them survive? They could not simply say, as we do: “Follow that path,” or “that is a good camping spot.” Such knowledge was nontransferable because neither the path nor the camping spot would be there after a generation or two. Humans of the stone age must have possessed a general wisdom about the landscape’s characteristics rather than about concrete locations. And this information must have been crucial for the survival of individuals and cultures.

Walking slowly is an understated art. I tried to find the perfect tempo and the perfect rhythm. I could feel my feet working, how my foot would land on the heel and roll forward and kick off with the toes. Even my little toe was working, this strange anatomical detail that seems to be both malformed and superfluous.