

Distanced, not isolated

I took my virtual dog for a walk today. Virtual sounds so much more grown-up, more twenty first century than imaginary. The real advantage of virtual dogs is that they offer everything that real ones do without the need to carry round bags of warm excrement or apologise for any behaviour other than your own. Also, they are an excellent excuse to study hedgerows in detail and savour the aromas of the day and one can talk to them without fear of losing the signal. It's a brilliant sunny spring day with a brisk breeze. We go out the gate a few steps to the end of the road and, turn right, a few more steps and out of the village. A bit along, round the zed bends and of onto the single track roads. We see a man in a tractor on the field. I wave and he waves back. Then down the sharp slope to the blind bend at the bottom of the dip before starting the long rise to the top of the ridge. We see other dog walkers scattered across the landscape before us. All are at a safe distance. Some have real dogs. Others, recognising the benefits, only have virtual ones. Then, suddenly, one with a real dog is coming towards us. The dog, large and friendly, drags its person into my distance. Shocked and confused, I realise that there is no agreed protocol in the new environment. Improvising, I pat the the dog's head and say "You're very friendly. You haven't got the hang of this social distancing thing, have you?". The dog looks suddenly disappointed that I have confused civil disobedience with incomprehension, as it's person jerks it away without catching my eye. In my embarrassment at yet another failed social interaction, I head on up the hill and reflect on the new reality that a Good Samaritan is now one who does pass by on the other side of the road. We progress, up the rise, stepping of onto the verge a coupe of times to let cars pass, by a large field of first bloom oil seed rape and, later, between hedges of blackthorn in bloom. Just before the hedges a footpath goes off to the right. It starts with a plank over the ditch. I once saw a lizard sunning itself here and now I always stop to check if it's back. For me, this is a habit. In better times I trail my grandchildren up here and, for them, stopping here has become a custom, even though they have never seen the lizard. In generations to come, this could turn into a place of mysterious tribal reverence. All this because I saw a lizard here, once. Should we describe this phenomenon as the Lizard Effect? The dog looks blank, but has displayed laudable reciprocity in its patience with my loitering. Beyond the hedges, between open fields, we crest the rise and, almost at the peak, we meet a fast woman in Lycra and earwigs who passes politely on the other side of the road but offers no response to a smile and a wave of the hand. So, at the peak at last and, facing another field of blooming rape, we turn to go back, into the east wind and I suddenly realise why the fast woman didn't smile. So, we proceed down the hill with the whole landscape spread before us and changing in perspective as we descend. A pattern of green, gold and brown fields, the rooftops of my own village on which I silently call down a blessing, the gantries of the container port on the Medway, the fuel storage areas out towards Grain and the adjacent Ministry of Defence munitions disposal site - would

exploring the logic of that juxtaposition open the door to an even more dystopian reality ? - and out beyond that, the maritime approaches to the Thames with large ships coming and going. We are half way down the the grade, beyond the lizard plank, when we are suddenly startled by a silent cyclist right behind us. He is so distanced from his bell as to be quite isolated and our startlement causes him to swerve dramatically. He shouts something as he rolls on down the hill, but I am distracted by a sudden sneeze and don't catch it, or the sneeze. Not in my elbow and not in my hand. It falls invisibly into the ditch, still running with water from the rain drenched fields. I can't blame the cyclist. He's not very fast so probably didn't get to the store before the panic buyers bought up all the bells. The sneeze might have been due to the catarrh that I've had for weeks, or Covid 19, or, simply, to being immediately downwind from a field of rape in bloom. We will never know, but the ditch carries it away, down the hill to the blind bend in the bottom of the dip where the brook turns away sharply to the right and runs down the valley to the far side of the village where it falls into a culvert and runs, under the frontages of some of the lowest lying homes, out to the river Medway. The sneeze is destined to flow beneath the unsuspecting feet of those households. For a dark moment I wonder if they are the panic buyers who have bought up all the bells but I quickly remember that I know these people and although many have real dogs - and some may, like me, have virtual ones, I find it hard to tell - I don't recall any having bicycles and there has to be some logic to panic buying , doesn't there? We continue our descent and reflect on the changing times. I question whether Mr Corbyn might feel some grim glee that his successor faces the double challenge of first deciding where the middle ground now is and, second, how to meet the expectation to be somewhere to the left of it - but the virtual dog turns out not to be good at opinions. And we get to the dip, the blind bend before the sharp rise. Horses in the paddock to our left murmur soft greetings in pferdish as we pass. They were silent on our way out. Perhaps they are too polite to speak with their mouths full? The dog shrugs and rolls it's eyes. Apparently, it's not important. We look at the stream as it turns sharply away from the road to go to the other side of the village. That sneeze could be here by now, but we see no sign of it. We climb the sharp rise beyond the bend. The man in the tractor gives another wave. I've known him for many years and this is unusual generosity. Perhaps this crisis is bringing the community closer together - or, maybe, he's forgotten he saw us earlier. I start to think about what I might do next. Perhaps deal with the flurry of email from the network of voluntary organisations to which I'm connected. All setting out their new arrangements for offering support to the vulnerable. Arrangements in relation to which I have been transformed from contributor to client by a small but emphatic gesture from the solemn podium. A soft blow that landed precisely on the ill defined spot where the hackles rise. Get over it. There will be more such blows. Some, perhaps, not so soft. Wise counsel from the dog. We are at the edge of the village and, looking down the street, I know the people here, most by sight, many by name, some are vulnerable, very vulnerable , and it is not just the

east wind that moistens the eye. We turn the corner and are at our own gate. It has been a good walk and I will do it again - and take the dog. It was no trouble really. I don't think the cyclist's dramatic swerve was really it's fault. I ought to give it a name. Gender is not important but being able to address a companion by name is somehow more, well, companionable. It's no good at fetching sticks so I could call it Onesimus, but to name a companion by reference to their inadequacy is unkind. I need to find a more respectful name that properly reflects, but not too effusively, the real nature of our relationship. Socius perhaps? Yes, definitely, Socius it is.

I am not isolated, just..... distanced?

Stay safe and well.

John