

Fortitude and Patience

By Jane Zhao

When I sprained my ankle a few months ago, I was reminded of the importance of walking—the smoothness and fluidity of movement, the ease, the control over speed and distance. In the phenomenological tradition, we are all peripatetic wanderers. Some saunter, shoulders back and bellies forward, leisurely strolling along. Others stride, busy with somewhere to go, bodies following their minds into the future. Some march in protest, arms raised and voices loud. Some walk with their child wedged in between, who jumps, soaring gleefully over cracks and crags.

In neuroscience, walking is thought to be the product of lower locomotor circuits. Relays of electrical information travel from your spinal cord to your legs and then back again. Functions of motion, balance, coordination, tension, and flexion that occur so flawlessly and automatically such that even a decerebrated cat can walk on a moving treadmill if his body is propped up. Of course, those of us who study the spinal cord and motor circuits know that the story is more complex than this. There are growth factors, neurotransmitters, proteins, and molecules that can intercept, interrupt, alter, and frame such a simple movement. Walking can also be a marker of a neurological disease. Those with Parkinson’s disease walk with a distinct gait, rigid, shaky, heavy with labor and futility. And who can forget the inverted bobbing gait of someone with cerebral palsy?

From grades four to six, my grandmother walked me everyday to and from the bus stop. It took about ten minutes. Every morning we would walk past a Catholic school, several blocks of houses, pass under a highway, and finally, cross the intersection where she would say, smiling, “Good morning,” to the two mothers who accompanied their sons to the bus stop. It was their inside joke. My grandmother would speak to them in English and they would reply back in tone-precise Chinese: *Zhao chen hao*.

One day, as we were walking past the row of houses behind the highway, the old man who diligently cleared his driveway after every snowfall came up to me and said, “Look at your grandma. She is all the way back there. Why don’t you walk together?”

It was true. She was nearly half a block behind me. I do not know what the exact circumstances were; perhaps I was annoyed at her that morning for something she did or did not say, or maybe this was my way of signaling that we were late. Whatever the reason, no rationalization could diminish the space between us. As I looked back again, I saw her small approaching figure, her baby soft hair. My grandmother was one of the last generations of Chinese women to have their feet bound. She smiled her thanks to the old man and nodded, “Good morning.”

Spraining my ankle made me remember this event.

I've never experienced illness in any debilitating way before. And there is a point, in the course of any illness, when one is forced to confront the realities of the body, this fragile body, this flower of a body. Spraining my ankle forced me to walk slowly; horizons changed. Merleau-Ponty, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, describes how the body knows, it naturally has a way of being in the world, whether you need to think about it or not. Having my mobility restricted, I realized what limited freedom meant. I was walking by sight, but relied more on feel – I had to learn the limits of my body and my interaction with the world.

I remember having to walk so slowly on freshly fallen snow that travelling the distance from my apartment to the end of the block took fifteen minutes. Growing up with my father, I was raised to value efficiency and time. When we walked together, it was more of an act of chasing after him. So when I walked so slowly that a short distance to the end of the block took a quarter of an hour, that freshly fallen snow meant the hazards of hidden ice and uneven footing, that everyone passed me—you bet I was frustrated! Walk well with every step, my parents often remind me. It's such a precarious balancing act.

Not long after I sprained my ankle, I found myself being driven up to a bar in the Mile End. Under normal circumstances, the hour-long walk up the streets of Montreal would have been possible; I enjoyed walking and exploring unknown streets. But that day, it was cold, I was injured, and we were running late. It was nearing the end of the night and everyone decided to head their separate ways. One by one, they were packing up to leave, hat, scarf, mitts, outerlayers, jackets. We headed back to the car and though we all left at the same time, with the same destination, I quickly realized I could not keep up. They were merrily chatting and walking along. I could see their backs, the wind blowing at their jacket, and the orange glow of the streetlights on the carefully fallen snow. It took nearly half a block for them to realize and wait. When I did finally catch up, I gained a terrific epithet: “the gimp.”

I was stubborn: I did not want to be treated differently. I pushed myself to keep up and refused any reminders that might give away my difference, like the ice to reduce potential swelling or the brace that helped stabilize the joint. I often distracted myself, from pain especially. I do not know whether it's due to the culture in which we're raised, to champion resilience, stoicism. You wince at the pain, the discomfort of a disjointed ankle at every step, but you'll never admit it. You push yourself much harder than you should, aware that the consequences might be less than satisfactory. When fluidity is taken away, gait changes. It suddenly becomes apparent to the rest of the world that there is something wrong. In this sense, walking is a performative act. It can mark identity as much as any other externality: another difference, another sameness—what difference does it make?

It's funny how memories surface, as if having never really left; what strange and obscure thoughts. The resurgence of the tide of the sea where you drink and are unsatisfied. The brisk fallen mornings, light without sunlight, frost but not cold. The first time I had to walk with someone after the ankle sprain, we moved so slowly I asked him to go ahead. He didn't listen. Our slowness felt profane.

Meaning takes form in the world, on a page quietly tucked away somewhere, in lines you scrambled to write down before they fleet away, in words you edit and carefully craft. Walking, of all things, brings me back to my grandmother. I came to recognize the friendship in that slow profane walk. Walking is one of the first things a baby learns to do, that first cherished cherub step. But it also inevitably means stumbling and falling. We do not always sail smoothly on. Skin scraps, bones break, tissues and muscles bruise. Let not only age or tragedy or disease remind us of our intense fragility.

It's a story about the arrogance of youth, the fragility of the body, and about maturity. Where are you going? Where have you been? Siting these old memories and monuments we erect. In literature, the motif of walking implies a journey. Movement, that perpetual movement, is safe. Whereas. Stop. Periods, commas, semicolons—all signs that indicate change, rhythm and flow. Only when you stop, do vulnerabilities reveal themselves. No, I do not mean to say that in one moment, I suddenly understood what it meant to be my grandmother, following behind, day after day. That would be untrue. There must always be a destination, exploration, a beginning, the journey—just walking dully along. Life happens, as you did not expect, the balkanization of dreams.

Meditating on walking brings me back to my grandmother because there are some things I will never be able to say to her: she died of colon cancer six years ago. I have a line from an E.E. Cummings poem stuck in my head: *nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals the power of your intense fragility*. Love is a rehearsal that we can never get right in the moment of; only in the comforts of retrospect do wanderers see the way.

I wonder if the old man still lives there, with his lawn and impeccable driveway. I wonder what English you would have learned had you stayed. I wonder if it is in your nature to love, or did your faith wane to certain death? I wonder if you knew that morning at the airport, as giant crocodile tears rolled down my cheeks, that that would be the last time. There are so many things I want to whisper to you still. I don't think I ever told you I loved you – that's not really our family's way now is it? I wish you stayed my favorite person: you became ordinary in the way that most extraordinary things often do. How often did you trail behind me like that? And how often did I remain by your side?

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