DUNCAN MINSHULL

– Introduction –

As the light fades and darkness falls . . . let's bid a good evening to the walker-readers out there. To you, especially, who is about to follow a variety of feet across the pages of *The Indigo Hours*, and hear how the owners of such feet – be they large or small, bare or booted, lone or grouped – face the same striking truth on their journeys. And how the truth has to do with transformation.

The journeys to come are caught in journals, letters and diaries, ranging from the 1600s to the present day. They record feet that move along the streets of great cities and along the tracks of tame and unruly nature, in all its settings. Feet that move through the dying embers of evening, through the moonlight, through the artificial lights (called the 'urban stars'), and on towards the break of dawn. And feet that move through an array of blues and near blues, as the night is imbued with 'cobalt' and 'azure', 'cerulean' and 'mauve', 'indigo' and . . . well, perhaps you can find some others.

The blues tell half the story. Transformation of everything tells the whole, as these hundred or so feet make their ways across the world. But I'll

defer to one of the walker-writers now, open to the changes, and observing that:

Few walk by night. It is a very different season. On all sides novelties present themselves. Who would have believed it? The smallest recesses in the rocks are dim and cavernous . . . a distant cliff looks like a phosphorescent space on a hillside . . .

And as his (booted) feet keep moving:

. . . every plant and field and forest emits its odour now . . . we hear the tinkling of rills which we never detected before . . . the rocks retain all night the warmth of the sun which they have absorbed. And so does the sand – if you dig a few inches into it you will find a warm bed.

So, sweet dreams to Henry David Thoreau in his bed of sand; who speaks for most of us, doesn't he? It's why he roams ahead. Believing that what he sees at night is unknown to him (as edges turn hazy and colours leech out); that the sounds and the smells of the countryside over-rule the sights; that these other senses attain a sharpness to the point of oddity, surreality. Be ready for this to happen. Things are not what they seem. And, as he will tell us, almost amusedly, 'Who would have believed it?'

Thoreau set off near Concord, Massachusetts, solo and unlighted, in the 1840s. But his sensory experiences speak for any age. For Nicholas Shake-

speare in a Wiltshire lane, almost hit by a delivery van, its wheels dangerously hushed here. Yet, he explains, a lion is primed to roar at dawn to launch *its* sounds across the damp air. Big cats aren't heard on Kate Pullinger's urban outing; often there is little to note except a love of street lighting, a 'sparkle' of neon and florescence and sodium, that draws attention to a woman walking. A woman having to be alert and, aside from Pullinger, a number of others note the same.

Pullinger bestows the word sparkle on artificial lights, which usually diminish nature's own lights – the stars. Ah, the stars! It was fun to fill *The Indigo Hours* with as many as I could catch, falling or otherwise. Their sparkle is infinite; they are named after gods and mythical figures (Aldebaran and Orion, Sirius and Pleiades gaze down on human counterparts), and they surrender such compelling stories. Also, they help us when we need them most, keep us company and show us the way. The North Star, for one, has always been a friend to the trepidatious night walker.

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As the light fades and darkness falls . . . so does human behaviour transform. You'll meet an unlikely duo of W.G. Sebald and Edith Wharton early in the collection. Unlikely, yes, but they share one thing during their dusky strolls – their views of a

world turning performative. Daylight vistas begin to resemble stage-sets under lamplight. For Wharton it is the passers-by who respond in kind, becoming self-conscious and ceremonial as the hours darken. They act out characters close to the 'generic', as in a comedy by Carlo Goldoni, and even a pet dog, a Pomeranian, has a strut-on part to play. Wharton is casting her satiric eye over a square in lively provincial Italy. But what is it about these effects of the night, wherever it happens to be?

The occasions are numerous and varied. See how the night turns genial watchmen into 'animals' in 1820s London; how the Edwardian middle-classes turn into 'squabblers' at Mont-Saint-Michel; and on the boulevards of 1950s Paris witness the passing of 'an alarming number of dingbats' – nervy nocturnalists, who pause to peer at cats and children playing, after the moon climbs higher in the sky.

Under the moon children are always heading off. Small feet are heard to patter. Though the more I rounded them up, the more I found them to be indifferent to the delights of the night. Kate Pullinger, again, is busy 'herding' five-year-olds through town; she is open to everything, while her charges are too absorbed in each other to see and sense as much – it's understandable. Pitiless are Jack London's hobo 'road-kids', patrolling their patches, marking their prey, convinced that this is what the dark is really for. Then, Zarina and friends march mile upon mile

and couldn't care less about a definite outcome. But at least Carol Lake's larky girls salute the phenomenon that helps their journey back:

> 'The moon shines bright on Charlie Chaplin,
> His boots are cracking, his boots are cracking . . .

We sing our way home; the moon rises up at the end of the street, shining straight into our path.'

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The animals and squabblers, the dingbats and road kids – they enjoy a certain release and glee en route. But the changes at night also bring on a 'Fearness' – a fear, felt personally, by the walker-writers themselves, not just their subjects mentioned. The trouble is, many writers are beguiled by the stories that exist, are prey to what's been said and scripted down the years.

Out there you'll encounter Joseph Addison on his Walk of Aged Elms. Who thinks the dark won't unsettle him with its unknowable 'noises'. Who thinks the rumour of the Shape Of The Black Horse Without An Head unsettles merely those of 'weak mind'. Oh to believe such guff! And yet . . . the further this finely-tuned rationalist steps amongst the trees, in deepest Worcestershire, the more unsettled *he* will grow. Step by step, thought by thought, fancy by fancy, the link is made between forward motion