

**THE OTHER ROOM**

**INTERVIEW SERIES**

**TEAR FET**

**This interview, between James Davies and Matt Dalby, took place by email from August 17<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> 2015. In the middle of this period Dalby performed at The Other Room under his moniker Tear Fet. The interview focuses on Dalby's recently completed walk around the M60 motorway. He blogs <http://santiagosdeadwasp.blogspot.co.uk/>**

JD: Hi Matt, thanks for agreeing to do this. Can you begin by explaining the project in literal terms? What you did, have done?

MD: Hi James, thanks for your interest in the project.

The mundane practical bits - deciding the general route (but not the detail), setting a date, setting up the web presence, buying the map etc. - were done quickly. From there I started what I regard as the first part of the project. That is, plotting and timing my precise route in a series of exploratory walks.

I should add I was keeping a reflective journal, which was integral to the project, but through my general inability to stick to things like that long-term and a lot of other distractions at the time, it fell off partway into the project.

The walk itself happened on 30 May this year, and while it was slower than I hoped was actually pretty easy. As I'd planned I recorded a quantity of audio and video which will be used to create separate sound and video pieces.

Originally the intention was to create a complete journal and the sound and video pieces I mentioned. That changed when I realised I needed a structure for the two bits of art, and started writing notes. It soon became evident that a separate project I'd started gathering together fragments of poems from across the previous five years was the ideal template. I adopted that long poem into the M60 project, and completed it with a series of lengthy passages designed to string it together. I mention this because the new material deals with a fictional drug called Icarus, which is like ecstasy, except that it has no euphoria - its entire effect (and the supposed reason for taking it) is a prolonged comedown. The themes from this section have become increasingly important to the project.

Growing out of the completed poem, and particularly the Icarus sections, a low-key, lo-fi song called I Have Come Down is the first fixed element in the sound piece. My semi-improvised composition Icarus which I'll debut at The Other Room 56 will also form part of that work.

Jumping back a step, since the walk I've undertaken a large number of additional walks around Greater Manchester - including revisiting the main walk in sections, gathering further video and audio. I'm now in a position to start editing together my sound piece based on the walk. Once that's complete I hope to have a way into my video piece, though I now also have an idea for an installation I can start right away.

Moving on, I hope to revisit and develop this link in my work between walking and creation.

JD: Two questions. First just a matter of clarification - you walked the whole of the M60 in one day? How long was your route? And second - the drug Icarus sounds interesting. Why

should anyone want to take it or is it sort of taken involuntarily? Is the drug symbolic of the landscape of the M60 as in 'the M60 is literally not nice' and also as in 'the M60 is emblematic of The Society of the Spectacle like Iain Sinclair sees the M25'? That's a lot of questions so I'll stop there for a second but I think they're all related ideas.

MD: To take your questions in turn; first, yes, I walked round the M60 in a day. I was actually walking on roads mostly outside the M60, and that took me 15 hours 45 minutes. That's starting at 6.30am and coming full circle to the same spot at 10.15pm the same day. I had to come inside the motorway between the Trafford Centre and Worsley, first to cross the Manchester Ship Canal/River Irwell, and then because Worsley was the first place I could pick up a continuous route without going a huge distance out. The walk was 79km, around 49 miles. The M60 itself is either 56km or 58km (around 35/36 miles) depending on which bit of Wikipedia you believe.

Second, regarding Icarus; in real life people use all kinds of unlikely substances: depressants like alcohol and heroin, dissociatives like ketamine, psychedelics, deliriants and more. These will generally have a euphoric effect followed by a dysphoria or comedown, though the nature of both will vary according to substance and circumstance. I thought the idea of a drug that cut out the middle section, or where (as the poem has it) the euphoria is indistinguishable from the dysphoria, was just funny. But I honestly think given the 'right' circumstances people would take something like Icarus.

Beyond the initial absurdity though, I thought it was something that could carry a lot of different meanings. The main one in my mind was as a perverse kind of protest, and a superficial contemporary political parallel. The idea being that with so many governments accepting an orthodoxy of austerity, and in the UK and across Europe a dismantling of the post-war settlement, perhaps embracing that misery might be a legitimate kind of protest. I suppose to mix theories I'm not terribly familiar with, it's a kind of abjection by means of internalising the alienation caused by the state of contemporary capitalism and the effect that seems to be having on liberal democracies. The complicating factor would be that (in the poem) the dysphoric euphoria comes about through the particular way the ecstasy-like empathogenic effects manifest themselves. A little like what I've heard about heroin there's a comfort in this dysphoria, but unlike heroin, and like ecstasy, I conceived of Icarus as a fundamentally communal experience. Which is partly where this protest against the atomisation of society into competing economic units comes in.

I also had in mind the riots of 2011, and the related concept elsewhere in the poem (and previously expressed in reviews) that ignoring politicians and politics, and living your life with little regard to the law, respectability or responsibility might be seen not as disengagement, but a critique of a culture and politics that fundamentally doesn't care for you. My thinking on this, like most things, is extremely muddy and conflicted.

Then there's the idea, coincidentally expressed recently in Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out*, that there's an important place for and purpose to what we conventionally think of as negative

emotions, such as sadness. Not that it's healthy to wallow, but that they are crucial to a healthy adult psyche. That was on my mind since my mother died during the planning of the project, after being diagnosed with an inoperable and terminal cancer more than a year previously. Her illness and imminent death probably helped spur the project into being.

More abstractly, related to these, I'd started to think of Manchester as an island, bounded by this great road. A theme through my work this year has been Islands - both actual and metaphorical. In my poem there's a section lifted from my writing about the walk which references Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (which is a big influence on the poem), and alludes to the *New Naturalist* book on Islands of a few years back. That book spends a long time establishing a definition of what constitutes an island, and it's a lot more complicated than you might think. Also in there, though I don't think explicitly, is Donne's *No Man Is An Island*.

That sense of Manchester as an island actually makes a physical sort of sense. Through a lot of the walk I was in edgelands, where the city ended and the countryside began. At least twice I walked along roads that turned into tracks and left houses behind, and suddenly I was in a rural rather than an urban setting. But then what lies inside the great loop of the M60 is far from homogenous. This entity you might think of as Manchester, or Manchester and Salford, or Manchester, Salford and large parts of Greater Manchester, is a cluster of many, many communities. So there's a push and pull there. At first you have this obvious geographical marker - this circular motorway with the dominant cities of Manchester and Salford and their satellites within it. But then you realise it's much less unified than that. However, in the process of parsing ever smaller communities within it you realise that communities overlap and interact, and suddenly Manchester - or what lies within the M60 becomes less isolated.

As far as the landscape goes, I have in fact a far greater appreciation of the beauty of Manchester now, and of how it connects geographically to Merseyside, to Cheshire, to Derbyshire, to Lancashire and to Yorkshire. And beyond them to a wider UK. I also have an increasing appreciation of the history of the place. I already knew about Peterloo, and Engels and Marx before I ever came to the city, but the traces of old, industrial Manchester persist, and their physical presence is a much more tangible link to those upheavals.

JD: That's a phenomenal distance in one day. Even in the days of yore you don't hear about Wordsworth walking more than 30 odd miles. How did you feel psychologically after that? It seems like a test of endurance as much as a psychogeographical act? A breaking through, an act of enlightenment. The most I've ever walked is around 25 miles. That certainly felt psychedelic and euphoric at times and in retrospect when tiredness, hunger, dehydration, less oxygen kicked in. I think any walk, by fact of it being 'a walk', feels that way for me. And by a walk I mean something at least 6 miles or so long - something that covers a decent distance of time and terrain. A walk in the park is not a walk. A walk in the park is an acceptance of the other part of the leisure package - work.

MD: That's a very good question, and something I haven't quite understood yet. That difficulty in understanding may be another reason why the journal ground to a halt.

The simple answer is that I didn't feel much at all psychologically. I wasn't especially tired, I didn't have any physical discomfort until after the walk was finished, and the walk didn't feel like it took a long time.

Okay, for the first six hours I was walking with one of my brothers, and for the next three and a half hours with my youngest sister and her baby, so for more than half the walk I was accompanied. That helps the time pass more quickly. But beyond that, I'm so used to walking long distances that it's easy for me to get into the mode where I know I'm going to walk 5-7 hours or more.

Walking is something I've done over great distances as a means of escape and reflection since I was a child. That might hint at another part of the answer - when I was a child walking was an exercise, like writing or drawing, where I could enter an altered state. I'd find that with no effort on my part those activities would very quickly put me in something like a meditative state, or perhaps more accurately a fugue state where my sense of self would completely drop away. It was something I'd only become aware of retrospectively. Suddenly I'd come back to myself, and realise that for the last half hour or more I'd been, as I thought of it, at one with my environment.

I suppose I'm something of an aficionado of altered states - whether they be chemically induced, the result of lack of sleep (or food, or drink), a product of mental illness, the result of inappropriate medication, or self-intoxication on new people or situations, I've experienced a lot of them. And those which interest me most are the most florid, the most transformative, the most unusual - and really, the rarest.

It possibly relates to my love of novelty, my endless chasing after exciting new sounds, new art, new whatever. One of the things that's exciting about anything new is that you don't have prior reference points. That means that everything is significant, there's an overload of information, and you can only process a small amount of it. As you return to the same thing, new aspects reveal themselves, but they don't have the same impact - unconsciously you've started to ignore a lot of the extraneous information. That's understandable and necessary, but it makes for a less compelling experience.

I'd already planned out the route on the ground in a series of short walks, and then walked the whole of both the western and eastern halves as preparation. Both so I knew the route, and to ensure I'd done some long walks in the run-up. That meant that I was starting to ignore a lot of what was around me, even though I wanted to take in and remember as much as I could.

None of which is to say I felt nothing - there are parts of the walk that are very beautiful and a delight to walk through, and there are others that are an absolute chore, boring and frustrating. But it wasn't a markedly different experience from any other walk, it just lasted longer and took in most of the available daylight.

Honestly, if I'd had a genuinely psychedelic or euphoric walk I'd probably have left my route and got lost. By way of an extreme anecdote which I've written about before, when I was experiencing a period of depression a couple of years back, the citalopram I was given started causing delusional ideas, synaesthesia, and near-hallucinations, which I'll go into shortly. Essentially it seemed to be exacerbating the anxiety part of my illness.

What happened is I was walking to work, and started going through Alexandra Park. It was late autumn, so the light was poor, but there were bright yellow leaves on the ground and wind in the trees. My mental state very quickly got out of hand. From vague synaesthetic effects of hearing the colours and smelling the sounds I progressed to developing a fixed idea I knew was delusional, but which I could do nothing about. I started to believe that I was simultaneously a wound, and wounded, and at the same time that I was a portal. It genuinely felt like the entire universe was pouring into me, and I had to let it pass through me, and try to articulate it or something bad would happen. Now, gradually that effect wore off.

Retrospectively it's quite funny, but it was very frightening at the time. A similar experience partway through a near 16-hour walk in somewhere unfamiliar and far from home like Kearsley would be a very bad thing. Obviously there's a middle-ground between the extreme of feeling nothing, and the extreme of imagining that you're feeling everything, but my natural interests lie more towards the latter.

The reason for mentioning it is that it ties back into my art. I think that anxiety, that inclination to take on as much sensation as possible, almost indiscriminately with regard to whether it's good or bad, is a crucial part of what I do. Because of that, although it might have been a bad thing for it to be otherwise, it was disappointing that the M60 walk barely registered at all as an experience.

JD: In Thoreau's book *Walking* he mentions something which I have always thought important. He says that a walk must never retrace its steps. That it must never become familiar. So this would cut out doing any walk for a second time including perhaps your prep. And also ideally a walk should be a line, not a circle (since in a circular walk you must retrace your steps by coming back to the end). I'm not sure what he would think about a psychogeographical walk as I think he means a walk in a kinda pure sense – like the walk is the only thing in the walk. If you were doing the same walk over and over but with a different purpose then it could be sensed different (I use the word sensed rather than 'thought of conceptually'). So perhaps you had already done the walk once before you 'finally' did it. Or perhaps not, perhaps the second time was with the purpose of completing it. Recently I walked from Hathersage to Monyash – what I considered to be a first time walk. But along the way at Monsal Head I started tracing part of a walk that I'd done before and forgotten about, from Grindleford to Buxton. So perhaps in some ways the full M60 walk wasn't new to you, due to all the preparation and knowledge of what you were about to encounter?

MD: There are a few things there. I haven't read Thoreau, but I can agree with what he says to an extent. That said, there are different kinds of familiarity. Some streets that you think you know well can look completely different if you walk them in the opposite direction. Or

you can know a street, and some of its connecting streets very well, but there can be whole estates running off it that you never really venture into.

There's also the different familiarity of knowing something by sight, knowing broadly where it is, and actually walking past or through it. That's often on a totally different scale in the city from the countryside. I grew up in the Yorkshire Dales, and walking was an important part of how I interacted with and understood the world. It was easy there to see places several kilometres away - sometimes a couple of hours walk, even looking from say the valley floor, and plan to find your way there. In most of the cities I've lived in or spent time in you can't do that. There are familiar sights, but they tend to be much closer, and it's often less apparent how you reach them on foot.

Personally I like walking without a map in cities, or just with a pocket A-Z in case I get hopelessly lost. It's how I orientate myself in a new place - I set out walking with the intention of losing myself, and then find my way back. I've done it in the UK on relatively domestic scales in Cardiff, Birmingham, Leeds, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and London, and on my few journeys overseas I've done the same thing in a limited time in New York, and over three months in Kunming.

One of the things that makes for an interesting challenge is that I can have difficulty translating between the map in my head, and a paper or digital map. My mental map is provisional and constantly being revised, as well as largely being aligned relative to wherever I happen to be spending a lot of time currently. So the problems in translation between my mental map, and the actual physical map are mostly to do with making them align properly, and also matching their scales.

What became clearer to me during the preparation, and in the walks subsequent to the big one, and it's something I enjoy, is how when the relationship between a couple of points becomes clearer to me I can feel and visualise my mental map actually folding-in on and rearranging itself. There's a tangible Inceptioning, like the city itself has just lifted and bent together, like it does in the film.

With the M60 walk, not only had I walked most of the sections twice previously in preparation, but the entire section from Stockport to just beyond the Barton Swing Bridge was familiar from many walks in the past. So too was most of the Whitefield area, and bits around Collingwood and Ashton. The difference with the last three was that previously I'd passed through them heading outwards, or back in. Kind of at right angles to the route I was walking in my preparation, and in the final walk.

One of the frustrating things was that I didn't have time to explore. Both because I had this walk planned, and because even if I walked out to some of these places, spent a couple of hours wandering about and exploring the exciting little corners, or trying to fit together places that I thought might be linked, then I'd still have the prospect of at least 2-3 hours walk in a straight line to get back home. There was always a lot that was unknown just beyond where I was walking, some of which I could put together, but which I couldn't get into because I had the walk to complete.

But there wasn't much alternative, if I was going to complete the walk in one day, the map wasn't going to tell me exactly how to do that. There were two sections at least - from the Trafford Centre over the Ship Canal round to about Worsley as it turned out, and from Oldham down to Ashton, that were extremely difficult to navigate if I was to stick close to the motorway. With the first I had to come inside the motorway, and with the second I had to take a massive diversion around confused estates and some rough parkland. Those sections required at least two walks apiece to come to a satisfactory solution. If I hadn't preplanned those the walk would have easily reached 24 hours or more.

That may have been a valid thing to do. I don't claim what I did was the right solution, though it worked for the limitations I set myself. But I see this as an ongoing project, and the terms of engagement are up for negotiation. I mentioned earlier I want to incorporate this kind of thing more into my art practice. I like the idea of one or more endurance walks or physical challenges each year, from which comes a piece - or several pieces - of art. This was a long walk, but I also like the idea of something more intense where I might improvise a sound piece, or a spoken piece, while doing something physically exhausting - so that I perhaps run out of both breath and ideas before it's complete.

Artistically that ties into my love of the rough, the unfinished, the work that makes you question whether it's any good, whether the artist knows or cares what they're doing. I like work where it isn't simply about technical mastery, nor on the other hand about 'truth', but about the actual visceral joy of doing it, or of getting a reaction. I'm essentially an improviser - I couldn't care less about virtuosity or verisimilitude, what excites me is the here-ness and the now-ness of something.

You can't get much more here and now, or much less virtuoso, than stumbling into a situation where you can't breathe properly, much less control your breath, and where you're flailing around for the next idea. It's the making that's interesting, more than having a completed product at the end.

JD: So can we pick up on the idea of what work has been completed from the M60 walk and what you envisage may come directly from it? There is the walk itself, you've mentioned journals and sound. Anything else and what would you say the 'percentages' are of what's been done so far and what's been most successful? And also another thing I'd like to know is that you also mention a kind of need to keep up this kind of activity. So what next?

MD: I have actually just set myself a rough timetable for how I want to proceed from here, to ensure I do finish things rather than let them drift.

Some things are done already - part of the Icarus section of the long poem is in the Total Recall pop-up exhibition at Bury Art Museum. And my semi-improvised sound piece Icarus, drawing from that and from an old song, was performed at The Other Room 56. I meant to record the performance, but forgot, so I may have to do another version at home to put in the planned sound piece.



What there should be at the end of the process is a long text poem of around 80+ pages; an audio piece which I'm aiming at being around an hour long; a video piece which I intend to be between an hour and 90 minutes long; an installation/sculptural piece; and a journal.

The immediate thing is to finalise my edit of the long poem - that's 99% done, I just need to do the edits already decided on. I forgot about the journal when I was setting my timetable, but I also want to write more in that. Probably that's about half done, or maybe less. Especially if I need to totally restructure the whole thing. I haven't set myself a deadline for the journal yet, but probably late November.

The next scheduled thing though is to start editing my sound piece together. The long poem gave me a loose structure, some themes, and a way in, and I have plenty of material. It's barely even begun, but I'm confident I can have it finished - or close to finishing by the end of September.

At the same time I want to make a start on the installation idea I have. I've got a pretty clear idea of what I want to do, how I want to do it, and where I can source the remaining materials. There's just a little expense which I'll need to spread out, and some of it is a bit beyond my skillset at present, so it may take a while. I'm not expecting results much before the end of November.

Immediately after the sound piece is done - or possibly starting while it's in the last stages - I'll have a look at all my bits video, do a rough edit, and see whether I need any additional material. The end of October is the date I've set for finishing that, but I'm fully prepared for it go on into November.

After that I'm not too sure - I've started looking into self-publishing options, and maybe launching everything around February. But my ideas for that are still very provisional.

The next thing is exploring further the links between my art and walking, between walking or other physical actions and improvisation and performance, and between all of these and place, or the properties of spaces more accurately. I have a combination of fairly well-developed ideas and currently more nebulous things in my notebook.

I'm in the process of working up some concrete proposals for a walk/improvisation for next summer, as well as thinking about organising some one-off events with other people at the end of this year/beginning of next year to explore some of these ideas. But it's all very preliminary at the moment.