A critical tourist like Mary Wollstonecraft
by Marit Kapla

AN ENDING

A few years ago, I made a note in my cellphone. It reads: ”Childbirth Mary Wollstonecraft.” Or to be truthful, ”Woolstonecraft.” Those three words, however I spelled them, bear witness to how little I knew at that point about British author, philosopher and feminist pioneer Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), and how much interest it awakened in me to learn that her life came to an end while giving birth to her second child.

Last spring, when I was commissioned to produce a text on critical tourism for the artistic residency program *Art Inside Out* in the Swedish province of Halland, the program’s artistic director Petra Johansson mentioned that Mary Wollstonecraft had traveled through Halland as part of the work for her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark,* published in 1796. I instantly decided I’d have a ramble on foot through Halland, following in Mary Wollstonecraft’s footsteps.

This turned out to be more easily said than done. Once I had read *Letters Written During a Short Residence* and a few other texts including historian’s *Tre kvinnor mot tiden* (”Three Women Against Time”) I realized that Mary Wollstonecraft spent very little time in Halland. She did arrive in Onsala, Halland, by boat from Hull in June 1795, but she continued directly to Gothenburg and then north, through the province of Bohuslän, to Norway. And on her way back, she merely passed through Halland, nothing more, traveling south by horse and buggy and spending one night in “Falckersberg” (i.e. Falkenberg).

But I had chosen her as my fellow traveler. Although more than two centuries separate us, we have both been on what may be referred to as the battlefield of childbirth. I survived. When Mary Wollstonecraft gave birth to her daughter Fanny Imlay, who, at the age of one, accompanied her on her travels in Scandinavia with her French nanny Marguerite, she had fought that battle once. The second childbirth cost her life.

A closer reading of the short introduction to her Scandinavian travel journal revealed to me a means of following in her footsteps without necessarily visiting the same specific places.

Her intention was “simply to endeavor to give a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through…” She added that

she did not wish to publish “arranged travel writing”. She had tried and had found the results” stiff and affected”. She continued: “I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained, as I perceived that I could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh.”

This view of travel and its description is quite close to the essence of critical tourism. In *Tourists like us. Critical Tourism and Contemporary Art* from 2013, an anthology edited by Federica Martini and Vytautas Michelkevicius, Paul Domela and others attempt to define the concept. According to Domela, critical tourism has less to do with traditional criticism of the fault-finding, negative variety, but may instead provide a way of traveling with heightened sensitivity, of being continually responsive to our relationship to our surroundings.

At the same time as Mary Wollstonecraft did not hesitate to aim traditional critical judgements – for instance describing the bourgeois women of Gothenburg as “fat at an early age,” and with “spoilt teeth,” comments not appreciated at the time in that town – her writing was in true dialogue with her surroundings in terms of both her “mind” and her “feelings,” in fact with her entire being. And thus, I decided also to “let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained” as I traveled through the province of Halland. I would portray what my eyes saw and describe the effects what I saw “produced on my mind and my feelings,” as Mary Wollstonecraft had done. I would be a critical tourist.

DAY 1

Mary Wollstonecraft arrived in Halland by boat, whereas I arrive by commuter train from Gothenburg. After a journey of twenty-six minutes, I disembark at the Kungsbacka station, film my foot touching down on the platform, post the film on Instagram and write: “Every ramble has a first step.” Mary posted letters from her travels, I am posting my observations on social media.

I am going to hike from Kungsbacka to Halmstad. These towns form the given starting point and finish line for my rambling owing to the connection between my text and the artistic residency program “Other choreographies, new spaces,” in which visiting artists from London and Stockholm will spend the autumn in Kungsbacka and Halmstad exploring the same concept on which I am working – critical tourism.

I buy a take-away coffee at the station and, sitting on a bench, I feel typically, negatively self-critical. My life contains so much more

freedom than did women's lives in the days of Mary Wollstonecraft. Her struggle was to achieve change, for instance with her pioneering document: *A vindication of the Rights of Woman* from 1792. And here I sit today, with a deep debt of gratitude to my feminist predecessors, having decided to use my freedom to make an uncomfortable journey through a province where I have been many times before, during a period when I have a plethora of other obligations. Was this such a wise idea?

I don't really have time to sit outside the station at Kungsbacka station worrying. My rucksack is packed and my accommodation booked along the way at twenty kilometer stretches. It is mid-August and night falls at half past eight in the evening. I need to have reached my destination for the day by then.

Poking around my rucksack for the map, I cut myself on something sharp. There is now a scratch on the back of my right hand, between my thumb and wrist. A scratch on the hand just like the one in *Years and Years,* the British television series I watched during the summer. It is set at some point in the future in a world where all the doom and gloom prophecies have come to fulfillment. A character is hit by a bicycle delivery man; his only injury is a scratched hand. But the scratch becomes infected, and the resistance to antibiotics the scientists are warning us about today is now reality. No antibiotics work, and the man dies of septicemia, also known as blood poisoning.

It was also septicemia that took the life of Mary Wollstonecraft two years after her travels in Scandinavia, when she gave birth to her second daughter, also named Mary. Later in life, this Mary authored *Frankenstein*. What happened to Mary Wollstonecraft was that her placenta broke apart. Antibiotics had not yet been invented, and Mary Wollstonecraft died on 10 September 1797, at the age of thirty-eight. Women still die in childbed, but nowadays mainly in countries where skilled care during childbirth is not always a matter of course. Death because of pregnancy and labor is most common today in sub-Saharan Africa. Although maternal mortality is on the decline globally, having fallen by one-third between 2000 and 2017, the United Nations recently adopted measures that will have to be taken to reach the 2030 target, not least owing to the risk that the pandemic will slow the rate of decline even further. Along with the threat of antibiotic resistance rumbling on the horizon, where such resistance will lead to fatal infections, no matter what their cause.

I start off to the southeast, using the map in my cellphone app to find the way to the Halland trail. A blue dot shows me moving away from

the station. There is no one else in view with a rucksack and a map. Do I count as a tourist while walking through an ordinary residential area? Yes, according to UNWTO, the United Nation World Tourism Organization, a tourist is defined as a traveler whose visit includes one or more overnight stays. Thus, I am an official tourist, soon to be a tourist who needs a toilet break. This problem will rear its ugly head regularly, and I will continually have to come up with new solutions in new places. It's not easy to find a bush to crouch down behind in residential areas. A filling station in Hammerö appears very conveniently this time. When I have left the built-up area and the trafficked road behind and am hiking on a little gravel path that runs along the Myra golf course, a wedge of geese crosses the sky in V-formation. Are they already migrating south? Later I read that they were not, but at the moment their noisy formation awakens a strain of melancholy in me. At last, I am beginning to be present in my nine days' ramble.

When I reach the ridge along which the marked hiking trail goes, I decide to take a short cut. I head right out into the woods and up a slope, through ferns and waist-high grass, crossing stony outcrops and mires. Hmmm, wasn't it "Other choreographies, new spaces"? By that point I'm huffing and puffing, talking to myself and cursing. How long would it take for someone to find me if I sprained my ankle out here? Come on, I'm fifty years old. I must begin to act my age.

Eventually, I hit upon the marked hiking trail and follow it to the church at Fjärås, which I enter and settle into a pew. The space and silence are overwhelming. Often, I go into a church straight out of a car, or at least right from a day spent primarily indoors. The experience of entering directly from a struggle with the brushwood is overwhelming and endows me with a sense, new to me, of the silence of sacred space.

In the nature reserve at Fjärås bräcka I find a picnic table and set out my lunch. A couple who join me at the table point out the unusual view: a lake in one direction and the sea in the other. Lake Lyngern spreads eastward, and the fjord of Kungsbacka glitters in the distant west, across the cultivated fields. Continuing west, I pass the grave-field at Li where huge, pointed stones rise out of the heath, on the slope down toward the plain. These are Viking Era gravestones, striking and unfathomable.

For my hike, I have equipped myself with the relevant maps from a set that covers all of Sweden. They are fantastically practical, plastic-coated against the rain, and invaluable for someone like me, trying to keep off the trafficked highways. I discover a dotted line, indicative of a "tractor track", that appears to connect several small trails along the way

to the bed and breakfast that is my destination for today. Sitting down on a tree stump in a recently clear-felled area, I check to see if the coffee in my thermos is still hot. A man comes along on foot, and I ask him if it is all right to continue walking along this road. Yes, he says, this is the old Gällinge road which “the Danes rode along in their day.” Ah yes, I am reminded that Halland belonged to Denmark until 1658.

This old country road was built to human proportions and for motorless vehicles. The woods are dense on either side, and I feel as if a cartload of locals, about to emigrate to America, might come rolling toward me at any moment. Halland was the part of Sweden that lost the largest proportion of its population to America. Perhaps I might even encounter the Bocksten man in his hooded cape, thought to have died in these parts in the fourteenth century. That evening I swim in the clear waters of Lake Långaresjö.

DAY 2

It’s raining. I don’t really realize how hard it’s coming down until I have been hiking for a while. Looking back while putting this piece together in late October, I check the Swedish meteorological statistics and see that there was more rain in the area that day than any other day since. I ramble along small roads with very little traffic until I reach Idala, thinking that ever since yesterday I have been seeing various dystopic omens: fields of blackened wheat, a signpost in the roadside ditch, where all the growth has been entirely mown down, describing the spot as a “road verge with numerous species of flora”, and all those robotic lawn mowers creeping around people’s grass, humming, as if to demonstrate the superfluity of human labor.

In 1795, dystopias were not in style. When Mary Wollstonecraft traveled in Scandinavia, she represented the optimism of her times. With her previous publications on the French Revolution and men’s and women’s rights, she was rated among the elite of European social philosophers. Her Scandinavian travel journal contains reports on silviculture and agriculture, business, politics, law, architecture, infrastructure and traditions, concluding that it is “the patient labor of men, who are only seeking for a subsistence, which produces whatever embellishes existence, affording leisure for the cultivation of the arts and sciences, that lift man so far above his first state.” There is an assumption in this sentence that when people labor not only to survive but also with the added driver of greed, that is when things tend to go pear-shaped. During the more than two centuries that have passed

since the publication of her book, this is precisely what has happened, making Mary Wollstonecraft practically prophetic. And yet her fundamental view of the potential of human beings is that they will do good for themselves and the world at large. Today it is difficult to imagine what it was like to live in an age in which a philosopher could write that: “the world requires, I see, the hand of man to perfect it.” What I see is the destructive effects of the hand of man everywhere I look, and not only in Halland.

In Idala, I eat my picnic lunch in the rain on a bench outside the church and then make my way back onto the Halland trail according to plan. According to the map, the trail now runs alongside a large mire referred to as “Sumpfgelände” in the German text. That sounds about as sumpy as this day is turning out to be. It’s pouring rain, and the ground is rippling with rainwater. The trail I am meant to be following has been transformed to a stream. At one point I find myself on a raised plank, surrounded by water, laughing wildly and skeptically. But there is no going back. I wade through the water, feet already soaking wet, and eventually reach higher ground with a view of Lake Stora Hornsjön below.

At Skårsik the map tells me there is a wooden windbreaker. A man and a woman appear to have abandoned their tent in favor of sleeping in the shelter. They have made a wet, smoky fire, over which the man is grilling a sweet pepper. He wishes me welcome in English. I say hello and pretend I hadn’t been looking forward to a break in the shelter. I continue out of their sight and have my sandwich elsewhere in the woods, feeling like your run-of-the-mill antisocial Swede. Will they include me in their travelogue?

Finally, the rain lets up. Despite not being particularly athletic or fit, I have managed to jump from tuft to tuft, surrounded by running water. I may just be tired and lonely, but I am feeling weepy with gratitude. My thoughts go to Mary Wollstonecraft, who died at thirty-eight. I think of all the other people who have fallen ill and died. Yet others have been ill and recovered. And others again, still unwell. I think of a former classmate whose funeral I attended last summer. It was his heart. My heart goes on beating in my chest, in Halland.

DAY 3

That night I dream I am getting on a bus in central Göteborg. I’ve totally forgotten that I am on a ramble and mustn’t travel by bus. It’s a great pleasure to fly effortlessly across the ground. In the morning I

decide to abandon the Halland trail in favor of a shortcut down to Varberg, arriving one day early and treat myself to a day of rest there. Since the youth hostel I have booked there for tomorrow is full that night, I book into one of Varberg's spa hotels. It's pricey at over two thousand kronor (approximately €200), undoubtedly beyond the budget of most ramblers. I make up my mind to enjoy the luxury instead of feeling guilty about it. Mary Wollstonecraft was also inclined to stay at the best inn wherever she stopped. One of the more vivid passages in her book describes having to spend the night at a posthouse in or near Uddevalla, where a dreadful stench "issued from an apartment, in which some eight or ten people were sleeping, not to reckon the cats and dogs stretched on the floor." Although she says she would not "associate the idea of a pigsty with that of a human dwelling," it is, of course, precisely what she does.

The very thought of spending the evening at a spa is so uplifting, I decide to go out of my way to see a site of historic interest. When your body is paying a price with every step, it is often difficult not to merely justify making do with the views on the shortest route between two overnight accommodations. But now I'm operating on excess energy as I make my way to the ancient burial mound near Veddige known as Rumpelösa church – "rumpless" being a popular, or ecclesiastically pejorative name used to mock the old Norse gods. Standing by the lichen-covered boulders I wonder what this place looked like some four thousand years back when the burial mound was formed. Were the fields below the slope under water in those days? Were what are now cliffs peninsulas, headlands and islets? I try to imagine the landscape rising gradually as the pressure from the inland ice decreased. How the land rose up out of waters dark. The inhabitants of this area at the time may, of course, have had an entirely different picture of the landscape, seeing it as immutable and fixed. In any case, I can sense both their and my mutual contact with the long, imperceptible movement of the land.

I cross cultivated fields and come upon a rise where the road runs between a farmhouse and its outbuildings. I'm not trespassing; this is a public road, but I still feel a bit awkward. However, the man at the roadside is affable. "Out for a long hike, I see," he comments at the sight of my map and rucksack. We exchange pleasantries and I continue out of his sight. This encounter feels like a film, as the world comes toward me on this ramble. Yesterday I passed the cows grazing on an estate known as Björkholm. A couple of curious calves approached and then retreated. They saw me and were frightened – I existed. Close to my destination for the night, I saw a roe deer. It loped up a hillside, the long

grass billowing around it like waves on the sea. Such sequences are perhaps par for the course during a ramble. I feel as if I am constantly shifting perspective, but the transitions are slow enough for me to absorb the signals of the present. I'm channeling some kind of primitive frequency of being.

I pass the River Viskan at Åsbro, having just spotted the church spire at Ås. Ås means "ridge" in Swedish, and quite rightly the church is situated on a ridge, giving me the same sort of epiphany I sometimes get when a bit of research makes it clear that there is an equivalence between the name of a place and the way the natural environment there looks (this place name, Ås, has been documented since 1345). A woman in a pink rain jacket is heading tansies she is picking along the roadside. I ask her why, and she tells me about the children at her after-school center will use them in craft work. She wonders if I am heading for Åskloster. I see on my map that Åskloster (meaning Ås Cloisters), which is also named after this parish, is located on the coast. It's too far away for me but I find a path through the woods heading in that direction. If I walk to Varberg that way, I'll be able to avoid the highways.

Sometime later I am walking along another "tractor track," which happens to cross a meadow where there are cows grazing. The far end of the meadow is blocked by barbed wire. I climb over it, scratching my shin. It's a long scratch, and I call it my "Halland track". Suddenly, I can't find my reading glasses, without which navigating the map becomes very difficult. I turn around and look at the cows. Not all of them are heifers. I decide to leave my reading glasses in the meadow on the other side of the wire and ramble on, crestfallen, hoping none of the cows will decide to chomp on my indigestible lenses, and afraid my age-related myopia is now going to cause me to get lost.

The hiking trail runs through a forested area parallel to the E6 motorway. It's odd to stand there, invisible in the woods, watching vehicles pass by at the speed of missiles. At the same time as I am so close to those cars, we are in separate worlds. When I reach Gunnestorp I see that there is a highway exit with, to my delight, a filling station. I use their toilet and buy new reading glasses.

"New Varberg" comes just before Varberg. It's the site of the original town, but today all that remains is the stone foundation of an old cloister. The cars speed past, a train running south thunders along the tracks, and there is a sign telling me that I have six kilometers left to Varberg. Only six kilometers. If I had been driving, I would have thought "Almost there!" But six kilometers on foot takes me an hour and a half. It's half past seven when I check into the spa. I'm the only person using

the facilities at that hour. Alone, I float in the pool, my feet and ankles aching, my thighs and calves pulsing. I've left my rucksack in the room.

DAY 4

Today I am going to meet with the artists who are doing the residency "Other choreographies, new spaces." We have a lunchtime date to meet in Varberg's "Lovers' park". I have so little luggage there is no point in leaving it at the hotel and going back for it later. I walk toward our meeting point with all my present worldly goods and a powerful sense of freedom.

It's too windy to eat our picnic on the beach, so we stay in the park, seeking shelter. While the others eat, I tell them in English about my hike. I babble on and on. Although I haven't been aware of it, I think I've been missing having company. When the group heads off to the archives of the popular movement I sit on, alone. In the park café I have a coffee and an ice cream. Today I have no destination to arrive at any given time. I'm already there.

I read my download of *Tourists like us. Critical tourism and contemporary art* on my phone. There's a description of what the authors call "non-places," such as hotel rooms and airports. I consider this concept. My whole hike has felt like being in some kind of non-place. Both walking through woods with no paths and in residential areas I have felt out of place, not meant to be there, or at least not that way. No one is making any money from my being there. Being there is not prohibited, but neither have I been invited. There are never any public toilets.

Eventually I discover that the café I am sitting in is too interesting not to merit more of my attention. Many of the other guests are senior citizens and appear to be regulars. Two women are scraping lottery scratchcards. A third woman joins them. She says she gave up on the idea of a swim. "It was so darned windy," she says. She's bought herself two glasses of wine. The red she downs directly, leaving the white. It's three in the afternoon. We seem to be here for different reasons, but who knows? To find the best possible means of distraction. To let time ripple through us, one Thursday in Varberg.

DAY 5

At the youth hostel I find a book on the chest of drawers outside my door. *The Bocksten man: find, conservation process, dating,*

clothing, by Albert Sandklef, from 1985. I read the entire volume at bedtime. This summer I visited the bog where, in 1936, some children who were helping their father harrow peat found the remains of a man. The skeleton was face down in the bog, impaled with two poles. Later, not least thanks to the well-preserved clothing, the find was able to be dated to the mid-fourteenth century.

Now, for the first time, I am going to see the Bocksten-man in reality, at the Halland Museum of Culture, in the Varberg fortress. Comparing the exhibition texts at the museum with the book by Sandklef I'd read the previous evening, I get a clear idea of variations in history. I mean I got a sense of how the way we interpret historical finds changes over time, and how there seems to be prestige invested in such interpretations.

Albert Sandklef was the director of the Varberg Museum, as it was then called, between 1921 and 1961. He was one of the first people to work with the body and clothes that had been found, and in his book he argues that the find was correctly interpreted and preserved by himself and his colleagues, and wrongly by some of his successors. On the texts at the museum describing the clothing, as well as on the museum website, I have the impression that the controversy regarding the various interpretations is sometimes enunciated, sometimes unspoken. The find of the Bocksten man seems to have given rise to numerous questions but no answers. When did the man in the bog live? How did he die? Who was he? Did he wear that red, V-shaped piece of fabric that was part of his clothing on his cape or on the collar of his pointed hood?

Oddly, not until now, standing there in the museum, do I fully realize that what I see in the exhibition is truly a deceased human being. A person who was once alive. Who was probably murdered, perhaps because he arrived at the local farms on foot, with demands from the powers that be regarding taxation or military service. Seeing this skeleton, with its intact head of strawberry blond hair, though washed out by the passage of time at the bottom of the bog, makes me feel melancholy. People killed each other in those days, and people kill each other today.

Later, I stroll south along the Varberg beach. True to form, I start humming songs spontaneously. First comes Starship's *Nothing's gonna stop us now* from 1987, replaced a bit later by a 1982 Swedish hit, *Den stora dagen* ("The great day"), which then continues on repeat. In my notebook, I write: "Weird!"

I have lunch at Joel's in Träslövsläge. The clientele and the price class differ from those of the café in Lovers' Park, but the beverages

have the same alcohol content. The foursome at the table next to mine are having pilsner with their lunch. I note that I am particularly obsessed with thoughts of alcohol. Partly, I'm sure this is owing to my decision not to touch a drop during my ramble. It would be too much of a physical strain while hiking, and so dispensing with it is no great sacrifice. Another part of the explanation is an increasing awareness of people's drinking habits as I grow older. Mary Wollstonecraft, too, returned time and again to the drinking habits of the Swedes. She described her first meal in Sweden, some half century before the teetotalers' movement took hold. It was at the home of a retired Lieutenant on the Onsala peninsula: "Fish, milk, butter and cheese, and I am sorry to add, brandy, the bane of this country, were spread on the board."

DAY 6

I pass the general store in Långås. The commerce is lively, people come and go. The woman working at the store brings a package for one of her customers out to the front steps. A while later I pass a closed-down store with an appealingly retro sign outside. Just as I am taking a picture of this now defunct shop, I feel a wave of irritation with myself. Why did I not photograph the open store? What picture of rural Sweden am I trying to give? Or is it that I find it difficult to aim my telephone's camera at strangers? It has always made me feel like a Peeping Tom, a bystander who looks on without having to expose herself.

I have noted during my ramble that when I cross paths with someone along the way, we are both Peeping Toms. We observe one another, reading the signals, judging. The moment one of us lifts a hand in greeting, or maybe even smiles, the spell of our reciprocal voyeurism is broken. We are sharing something. I'm here, and so are you. We are here together.

Today I hike past lots of farmhouses and little villages named after men: Andersgård, Per-Larsgård, Bengtesgård, Hansagård och Jönsgård. I think about all the other place names I have passed, and the destinations marked for the drivers on the highway, always naming the larger communities: Kungsbacka, Varberg, Falkenberg, Halmstad and Laholm. When I was little I asked my parents why the road signs told us how far it was to Mora, when we were just going back to our village, Osebol. Although the rational explanation – that there were probably a lot more people headed for Mora than for Osebol – was true, of course, at the same time it distorted the world.

I am far from the first traveler to note the hierarchy of road signs. In his *Sverige, en vintersaga* (“Sweden – a Winter’s Tale”), volume two from 1989, Swedish author and poet Göran Palm wrote:

> A village along the way is seldom signposted
> and certainly never the lakes and the hills
> never a forest, a swamp, a meadow, a mountain,
> except for the few that are national monuments,
> but instead and oftener still
> they trumpet forth the number of kilometers
> left for the cars to reach the next city
> and then the next, city after city
> as if they in themselves, were monuments.

This distortion makes it easier for people to leave Osebol, in Värmland province, and move, for instance, to Gothenburg. As far as 400 kilometers away the signs are already proclaiming the distance to Gothenburg. That makes people think that if they lived there it would be easier to find the way home. So they think.

I am headed for Falkenberg, and on the way I want to see the farm where Timo Takanen grew up: A Finnish child sent to Sweden during the war, who lived with a farming family in Vinberg and who later became the father of Anna Takanen, actress and theater director in Sweden. In her first novel, *Sörjen som blev* (“The Sorrow that Followed”) from 2019, she portrayed his life, and the silence in a family that can follow upon a war. Standing on a gravel road, I see the farm on the other side of the ripening grain fields. This is where he grew up, in a foreign country where people spoke a foreign language, and without his mother.

I know a somewhat older guy who also arrived in a foreign country where people spoke a foreign language, without his mother. A war was on, just as it was when Mary Wollstonecraft traveled from England to Scandinavia, and the world was in turmoil, just not quite as close at hand as when Mary Wollstonecraft was here and the countries of Europe were at war. During the August days of my ramble, I receive push notices about the Taliban gaining ground in Afghanistan. I feel ashamed that the guy I know never really had a chance to stay in Sweden. Precisely because he was applying for asylum, he was unable to satisfy the legal requirements of the Swedish authorities in relation to his asylum application. His application was rejected and he was deported just a short time before the collapse of democracy and human rights about which I was now receiving news notices. What had I done? And what could I have done? And again, what had I done?

When I am just a few hundred meters from the youth hostel at Skrea strand, near the seaside, my brother phones. I sit down on a wooden bench outside a corrugated steel structure housing a few shops. Three young men bike toward me. “Are you the one who’s always leaving a coffee cup here?” one of them asks, pointing to the coffee cup on the table in front of me. I deny this, but he seems angry, muttering to himself and vanishing through a gate into a little garden. One of the other boys approaches, explaining: “He’s a bit off his rocker.” A minute later he asks, “Who’re you talking to?” “My brother,” I reply. “How old is he?” the young man asks. ”So, how old *are* you?” I ask my brother, laughing because that question is so seldom asked of adults. “Forty-three” I tell the boy, asking in return how old he is. “Fifteen,” he tells me. The third boy interrupts us, biking past. He gives me a shout: “Hey there, man!”

DAY 7

On my way out of Falkenberg, I pass a plum tree with a sign: Help yourself! I have to make an instantaneous decision to pick or not to pick, balancing the benefit of an extra addition to my provisions against the cost of extra weight to carry. If I’m going to pick plums, I have to decide how many. A ramble requires a constant series of rapid micro-decisions. I’m in no rush, but I have no time to waste. It reminds me of having sex or dancing. What is the best next move? And the next? And the next?

I cross the Suseå River at Svensgård. A man from Germany is photographing the old stone bridge with a drone. I sit down at a distance with my thermos and my sandwich, so I don’t have to hear the whistling of the airship. He sees me, and when he is done filming he comes over, saying he hopes he hasn’t been bothering me, and gives me his business card in case I’d like to order some of his pictures. I’m not invisible. Neither are my reactions, both of approval and of deprecation.

I hike along little roads in the direction of Långasand, stopping at the beach at Ugglarp, where I find a spot out of the wind, in the lyme-grass. It’s a sunny day and less breezy than it was in Varberg. I change into my swimsuit and cross the sand, heading for the water’s edge. I pass a woman lying on a beach recliner with her eyes shut. Thomas Mann’s novella *Death in Venice* comes to mind, as I recently read it in Linda Östergaard’s new translation into Swedish. In the story, a renowned author, Gustav von Aschenbach, travels to Venice, where there is a cholera epidemic, and finds himself obsessed with a handsome youth. Toward the end, von Aschenbach is sitting on a beach

chair as his life runs out. I pretend that the woman in her recliner is von Aschenbach. Would this be the ideal death: to die in the sun on a sandy beach?

When Mary Wollstonecraft was in Tönsberg, Norway, she also wanted to have a swim, but finding no suitable bathing place in the town she instead found a pregnant woman to row her around. Mary Wollstonecraft insisted on taking over the oars. “It was not difficult; and I do not know a pleasanter exercise. I soon became expert, and my train of thinking kept time, as it were, with the oars, […]." As she rowed along, her thoughts wandered: “I cannot bear to think of being no more—of losing myself—though existence is often but a painful consciousness of misery; nay, it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist, or that this active, restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organized dust—ready to fly abroad the moment the spring snaps, or the spark goes out, which kept it together. Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable—and life is more than a dream.”

DAY 8

Leaving Steninge, I think about the fact that I’m hiking “The Coast Road South” as in the lyrics to the song by that name (*Kustvägen söderut*) by the pop group *Gyllene tider*. I listened to that song nearly forty years ago, back in Osebol, having no idea which coast road Per Gessle was singing about. It’s August. In that month exactly twenty years ago I took the only pregnancy test of my life. It was positive.

Gyllene tider used to rehearse in Harplinge. Approaching that community, I listen to another song of theirs, where the lyrics describe driving from Halmstad to Harplinge. The words must have been written, I think, by someone who was still quite young, but who had also left behind a time he knew he’d never get back:

> There’s where Martin Stjärna lived
> way back in seventy-eight
> and this is my turnoff here.

I stop for coffee and to read the local paper. In the café, people come and go, buying bread and gossiping. This is the point at which I have passed the 150-kilometer mark since leaving Kungsbacka. Approaching Halmstad, I have put behind me a great deal of Halland, and yet there are lots of places I haven’t visited.

That evening I check into a campsite at Villshärad where I have booked a trailer. A couple sitting outside the one opposite mine are having a glass of wine, and when they see my trouble with the lock, the man comes right to my rescue. Walking back and forth to the very tidy community washroom to brush my teeth, the campsite is dark and silent, the grass bathed in dew. This is the first night on my hike when I have trouble sleeping. I read the 2016 edition of the selected poems of Ingela Strandberg on my cellphone. Many of the poems in *Vid Oro Skog* ("When worried, woods") are set in the farmlands of Halland, though from a sort of existential helicopter perspective. For instance, in *Sädesfälten* ("The grain fields") from 2002:

Well-traveled
the grain fields stand
in the blazing sun, nocturnal
it was a safe landing, except
for a fugitive wild boar tendril
that's appeared on this side of the road

Where the fields have been
I do not know, but they have traveled
all summer, far
I think, you can tell from the strength of
their scent, overpowering
of earth, space

Perhaps they met up with
my childhood out there

and saw the fat stock
die with oats in their mouths

When I run
the fields stretch
behind me with the lethargy
of rooted trees
releasing their grip
on a season.

The summer night outside my trailer is autumnal as well. Who's moving and who's standing still?

DAY 9

I wake up with a sore throat. For the past eighteen months any signs of a cold have become a major problem. I cancel the dinner I was supposed to have with the residency artists this evening in Halmstad to celebrate the end of my hike.

The children are back at school, the tourist season is over, and it's not easy to find a place in Villshärad to get breakfast, or even a cup of coffee. After hiking a few kilometers, I reach the golf club at Ringenäs, where I settle in on the terrace with a wrap. Rhythmic lounge music streams out of the loudspeakers, and a fountain bubbles in an artificial pond. The chaos of the world is elsewhere. If you are prepared to pay your green fee and follow the rules, you can sit here like me. I have no desire to move on.

I have nine kilometers left before I reach the Halmstad train station by the shortest route, but if I go that way I will miss the beach at Tylösand, where I've never been, but which figures in the music of *Gyllene Tider* that I've listened to since the 1980s. Despite my cold, I decide to take the long way round, doubling the length of my route for the day, remembering *Tylö Sun* with its fantastic synthesizer riff. Walking along, I realize that I will miss this rambling when it's over. Every day with its defined destination. Whatever happens, I will have walked twenty kilometers by bedtime.

In Frösakull there is a road called *Flygsandsvägen* (Shifting Sands Road). It brings to mind a remarkable short story by Selma Lagerlöf, *En historia om Halland* ("A story about Halland,") published in a volume called *Troll och människor* ("People and Trolls") from 1915. She wrote this story as a kind of compensation for having given Halland such short shrift in *Nils Holgersson's Wonderful Journey through Sweden*. The story is about a tinker by the name of Jan who moves to a farm where the shifting sands need to be constantly shoveled away to make way for arable fields. Forest clearance, farmers' ploughing and cattle grazing had eroded the earth in Halland, and the shifting sands were the scourge of Halland until the second half of the nineteenth century, when planted forests began to bind the sand back into place.

In the short story, Jan is initially industrious, but after some time his legacy begins to catch up with him, and he returns to the life of a drunken tinker. The moral of the story is uninvitingly essentialist. The son of the farmer concludes that Jan was "unable to think or act as he ought to have done. He was a breed apart, and had to live in line with the breed from which he came. No matter whether this led to fortune or

misfortune for himself and for others, he quite simply had to follow his nature."

In her Lagerlöf biography, Anna-Karin Palm argues that this storry is proof that Selma Lagerlöf was a child of her times, when the given conclusion was "once a tinker, always a tinker." And yet, Palm continues, it was quite radical to write compassionately about a tinker. Selma Lagerlöf was, at one and the same time, a racist and not a racist: "And what about us, today? Have we really come that much farther in terms of our view of people who are considered different, who violate the norm? Can we embrace an 'us' that acknowledges difference as something individual rather than as shaped by a group identity, an 'us' broad enough to encompass everyone? It's easy to be judgmental about the shortcomings of our predecessors, and more difficult to recognize the specters that inhabit our own age." As I write this in October 2021 the chair of the Swedish conservative party, Ulf Kristersson has recently commented on the fatal shooting of the rap artist Einár in a suburb of Stockholm, saying that today gang violence can take place right in neighborhoods "where perfectly ordinary families live." The question arose, of course, as to what "ordinary" families are, and where the "less ordinary" families live.

As I approach Tylösand, I receive a text message informing me of the death of someone important to me. A woman in Osebol who looked after me when I was little has departed this world. I saw her just a couple of weeks ago. She was ill, I knew it might be the last time I saw her, and it was. I sit at the top of the sand dunes, phone my mother, and then have the last swim of my ramble.

I follow Prince Bertil's trail into Halmstad. It's a lovely late summer afternoon and, after some time, evening. Joggers and bikers pass me by, and I hear fragments of conversation. A German couple manages to persuade their son to leave behind a rock he found and wants to carry. A lesson in childrearing. All three look disgruntled. As his parents walk on, he shouts: "*Warte mal!",* "Wait up!" A woman jogger says: "Yes, things are terrible all round. We're going to family court." The man jogging beside her replies: "Well, I'm glad you're working on it. No other choice." Two young men bike past. One says: "So, did you have a good time in Malmö?" His friend responds: "Yeah, it was fun. We went out drinking Friday and Saturday." I look straight into people's back yards. I'm watching people's lives from behind.

Hiking is a slow way of moving, still it's over much too soon. At the Halmstad train station, a wedge of geese in V-formation passes overhead, a reminder of something we had in common just recently.

Now I'm Mowgli going into the man-village to rejoin his fellow humans. I remember scratching my hand, looking for the scab. It's gone.

A BEGINNING

A couple of weeks after my return home, I make a little trip to the Onsala peninsula, to Skallanäs, in the company of program director Petra Johansson and Henning Rehnström, one of the resident artists. He has a special interest in labyrinths, and we are going to see one. It's a kind of ancient monument, though difficult to date and of unknown origin and significance. Labyrinths are often found near coasts and old shipping lanes. These labyrinths are also referred to in Swedish as *Trojaborgar* ("Trojan forts").

The labyrinth is easy to spot, located as it is just alongside the path. It looks just like the one on the cover of Tomas Ljung's book *Sarmatiska havet* ("The Saramatic Sea") from 2019. Ljung is a poet, biologist and cultural historian, and in his book he reflects upon a large number of ideas he has been considering while accumulating his extensive library. It is a fascinating presentation of fragments of our cultural heritage, human migration streams, and identity. His explanation of the term *Trojaborgar* is that it may have something to do with ancient Troy, which plays such a key role in Homer's *Iliad*, and stands in relation to our universal conception of migration and travel.

It was on the beach somewhere near here that Mary Wollstonecraft disembarked when she was traveling to Scandinavia. According to Per Nyström, her very first landing was on the island of Nidingen, which rose up as the inland ice withdrew, and which is visible, with its two lighthouses, from here out near the horizon. I was there this summer, looking toward land and thinking about how much easier it is to feel like part of life on earth at sea than in a city. Today I stand on land looking out to sea toward the island.

I enter the labyrinth. This kind of maze is not difficult to find one's way through. I just follow the pattern and inevitably reach the middle. I feel more clearly on the correct path in this labyrinth than anywhere else. I turn around and walk back out.

Translated by Linda Schenck

PLACES I PASSED INCLUDE (overnights asterisked):

Kungsbacka train station, Hålabäck, Hammerö, Rolfsån, Streva, Tofta, Myra, Hansagård, Lekevallen, Stöten, Harås, Fjärås, Bräckan, Li, Tom, Styrskulle, Vagnslätt, Halla, Långaresjö * Gällinge, Dugatorp, Gunners, Stockared, Utmaderna, Idalahult, Gårdshorn, Jönsekulla, Långemyst, Björnås, Stora Hornsjön, Brittaviken, Skårsik, Bråtakulle, Stättared, Spakås, Björkholm, Björkhult, Heden, Sandlid, Långakärr, Skattagård, Syllemad, Vagnabäck, Östra Hed, Västra Hed, Sprängskulla * Kvarnome, Börs, Björkhem, Torstorp, Larsgård, Bingas, Åsbro, Viskan, Derome, Ås, Stengårdshult, Slätterna, Fäxas, Buared, Brotorp, Buareddamm, Jordbro, Tolens, Esbjörs, Balg, Gunnestorp, Anneberg, Lindhov, Brunnsberg, Varberg * Kärleksparken, Varbergs fästning * Apelvikshöjd, Subbeberget, Apelviken, Södra Näs, Nygård, Träslövsläge, Gamla Köpstad, Ås, Galtabäck, Hamra, Utteros, Vråen, Munkaskog, Hermanslycke * Kärragärde, Less, Askhult, Andersgård, Per-Larsgård, Komleryd, Långås, Hamringen, Bengtesgård, Hansagård, Jönsgård, Vinberg, Åminne, Jonstorp, Vinbergs kyrkby, Tröingeberg, Tröinge, Ätran, Slätten, Kristineslätt, Hjortsberg, Skrea strand * St. Hansagård, Åstorp, L. Hansagård, Kull, Backen, Kaggs, Svensgård, Suseån, Dala, Söndregård, Heljas, Vesslunda, Långasand, Ugglarps havsbad, Kil, Ugglarp, Stensjö, Steninge * Hulabäck, Karlslund, Marbäck, Skintaby, Hansagård, Kullagård, Hurragård, Bolet, Rosenlund, Harplinge, Fjälldalen, Åkersholm, Gullbrandstorp, Villshärad * Slätten, Ringenäs, Frösakull, Tylöbäck, Tylösand, Tyludden, Tjuvahålan, Svärjarhålan, Sandhamn, Grötvik, Långenäs udde, Långenäsviken, Örnäs udde, Eketånga, Slottsjorden, Nissan, Halmstad train station.