

UNBOUND

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND: NEW WRITING 2020

'Unbound' has been written to resemble a book whose chapters have become unbound, and can be read in any order. There are 9 chapters, of 111 words each; they include the diary entries of someone who eats, reads, and walks. 'Unbound' tries to represent the uncertain chronology which is a feature of the present days.

She has to go out once a day. She chooses her route carefully. Today's route brings her back from the right with the moon behind her and the road where it always is. A crack in the bathroom window, could be new since yesterday. Last few steps, last piece of chocolate. Suddenly no steps left, she's home again. She still likes this home. Always tired at a walk's end, nerves on tip-toe, watching watching walking walking. The weight of the key on a ring with a blue plastic duck. The end of today's walk and she remembers all that happened, the cartoon dog the blue weather the hole in the ground.

Page one. You hadn't read a book since yesterday, you were only doing it now because you'd decided to read one every day and it seemed a shame to stop. You got them from people's gardens, the kind of gardens with signs that say "Free books – help yourself", you chose them by thickness, two hundred pages, enough to seem like a real book. Once you'd read them you returned them to the garden library. You never knew if a book would be about anything, some aren't, like people who keep talking because they've nothing to say. You filled a glass with milk, you sat at the kitchen table, you started.

I won't know the name for a meal eaten at 4.00 pm. I'll measure the right amount of pasta into a pan. I'll boil the water in my kettle and pour it on the pasta. If I look through the kitchen window a pale girl will be playing on a red bicycle. The pasta will take eight minutes. I'll heat some sauce that'll be left over from the weekend, it'll have tomatoes, garlic, onions, mushrooms, basil. All this will still be allowed. It will not be the first time I'll have made this meal; I'll have learned to pace its two elements so that they'll be ready at the same time.

Today was an even number so you went out of the house and turned left. The gate squeaked but the hole in the road was still there. Some people peered into it, others made a detour. Today's dog was a hopeless one, flat on the pavement, a cartoon explosion of a dog. Walking walking, past the coffee shop that called itself an arts centre. Suddenly on the bench there was a sculpture of someone sitting. The sculpture got up and it was a woman, she smiled. A bus with an advert about tourists but you weren't one. Weather, that shifty mix of clothes when it's sunny and windy all at once.

She'll read to the end. The end will be disappointing. A dozen pages left, suddenly the hero'll be watching tall strangers through a broken window, he'll have no idea what they're saying, he'll make up ten things and that'll be all. She'll feel cheated; she could make up things herself, better things. They'll be improvising poetry. Discussing their friend's criminal past. Choosing a name for an actual cat. Making up a language. She'll think, I'm going to write these down. It'll have taken nine hours to read this book, pausing only for meals. In the book's world, years will have passed. Every day she'll forget what hard work it is, reading.

You decide to keep a diary. Today's breakfast is porridge. You fill a cup with oat-flakes, add salt, pour it all into a pan. In the same cup you measure a small quantity of milk and fill it up with cold water. You pour this blend over the oat-flakes. On the television a man is laughing. You turn on one ring of the cooker and stir the mixture as it heats. He is still laughing. You check the temperature so that the porridge doesn't burn. In four minutes it is ready. You decant it into a bowl, add cold milk, eat it with a spoon. Tomorrow you plan to make toast.

Page ninety-eight. I'm reading slowly because this one's complicated. There's a girl who likes jam and a fish who doesn't do much and music the hero thinks he doesn't like but then finds out he does. I'm not sure who this hero is or if he's at all heroic. The book's about his responses to the jam girl and the fish and the music. I wonder if the author believes the hero believes in love at first sight. I drink some milk, I say This book should be bigger than the size of it. I pause when the doorbell rings; I give the caller time to leave then go on reading.

Her alarm clock rang. 11 pm - time for supper. She decided on a peanut butter sandwich. She cut a slice of white bread which she had paid for, spread it thickly with peanut butter from a jar, cut the bread in half, placed the pieces together, peanut butter on the inside. She ate and looked back at the day. She realised she hadn't had five pieces of fruit. From the bowl she chose a grape, an apple, a raisin, a banana, another grape. She arranged them in a circle. Starting with the second grape she went anticlockwise until she'd eaten them all. Time for bed. She reset her alarm clock.

I'll be walking walking walking. I'll be travelling light. No need for a passport. No need to change money or clocks. No jabs, no pills. No compass but the one in my head. I'll remember sometimes having to think what to pack, what to leave. Map. Guidebook. Camera. Hat in case of rain. Hat in case of sun. Wool in case of cold. Cream in case of heat. Midge cream face cream sun cream. But not today. Today I'll be going where I always go, watching the world. No suitcase no book for the train no cash for coffee. Just the good nervousness, how will it be different from every yesterday.

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Iain Matheson is a musician by day, and a writer (mainly of poetry) by night.