

Beating the Bounds

The lines between the towns in this state shall be perambulated, and the marks and bounds renewed, once in every 7 years forever; by the selectmen of the towns, or by such persons as they shall in writing appoint for that purpose.

— New Hampshire state law (NH RSA 51:2)

Where once the long-dead red oak
held the line, announced the town's edge:
a stone marker. Where a dairy barn once
asserted itself, keeper of the borderlands,
a pile of boards riddled with the tunnels of insects.

There are laws. There are numbers.
There's a line you must perambulate —
must practice like cursive's first signature.
You must not merely walk
but *beat* these bounds, like rugs
hung outdoors for a thorough spring cleaning,

or like bushes thrashed to flush creatures
or ideas from beneath

or like the well-tempered shield
of your own scarred heart.

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At Ascension in a medieval parish,
the priest would gather a small group
and lead them on a ritual walk
along the town's entire border
to plod the line between *us* and *them*
into communal consciousness. Young boys
were always brought along to ensure
the endurance of the memory
past the boundaries of decades and death.
Given willow boughs, the boys

beat the border markers, but also
were sometimes whipped themselves,
or thrown against the boundary-stones
for a visceral, embodied mnemonic.

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Where does the body end, the town begin?
Will you walk the line true, right through
the pond, the swamp, the bull's bright field
littered with jagged crumbs of glacial granite?
Sometimes you must tend the scar
where your town broke into two towns.

You must walk the path you think you know again,
to see how, again, you don't fully know it.
How the border changes, how you change,
even though the printed maps assert
permanence with their typographic certainties—
their precision of scale, their tidy legends.

You must come for it, this line
that spells home; you must care for it,
tend it as if it were a friendship or
a garden or a habit of prayer.

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Beat the bounds every seven years—
not often enough to trample a path
that will be there waiting for you next time,
but still, you imagine it could be so—
that brief delusion, those moments when
you're sure your muscles remember and
you're looking for what's not quite there.
No path visible—just enough dots to connect
in the second-growth archipelago:

this broken tree to that shard of stone wall—
from remnant to remnant—marker to marker—
relearning, touch by touch, the forgotten skin
of a loved body miraculously returned.

I think of the long-dead stars
and their slowpoke light trickling across the void,
the lines we conjure between them
so they'll make sense to us, becoming *ursa, lyra*.

And so of course we trace the contours
of the terrestrial constellations — the sets of lines
we name parish, town, body: all synonyms for *home*.
We follow the trailing incense of the priest's prayer
and our bodies are the very bounds we beat,
the only evidence that has a chance at lasting
until the next perambulation. The line starts
disappearing right after we tread it into the grass.
The signature unsigns itself
every seven years, forever.