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When Walking

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Mary Beth Baustian

When Walking

The wide umbrellas and opposite cars,
narrow sidewalks and cold shoulders
made walking in Oxford a strategic exercise.

I walked fast and fastidiously
in my red wool coat;
I visualized the muscles of my legs
as they tensed and stretched
to cover one extra square of sidewalk.
At the corner of Little Clarendon and Walton
my breath was heavier,
and at St. Giles and Broad
my calves began to burn.

By the end I knew:
Edge tour groups
and step quickly right of bus queues.
The very middle of pedestrian Cornmarket is a sanctuary,
away from ins and outs of the shops.
Beware of bikes, they blend into the crowd.
No one moves aside for you. Don't expect them to.
Be resolute in your path
and you'll clip along nicely.

On That Sidewalk

I know the British aren't quickly friendly.
They stride along the ancient, uneven pavement
under their portable, domed cathedrals and are
private by curtains of rain, until, suddenly,
they lift their umbrella, or tilt it to the side
to let you pass.