

Beetle Movements

Sarah Hopfinger
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, UK
s.hopfinger@rcs.ac.uk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2026.17.2.6286>



I'd recently turned twenty-nine. I'd spent my birthday hiding inside my flat, hoping no one would notice.

Your flare-ups—when you take over my body and put me to bed for long periods of time—had been gathering momentum throughout my twenties. Even when you weren't flaring, you were always there, hovering across my lower back and traveling down my sciatic nerves, being loud or quiet or something in between. Your relentless presence, along with the codeine and anti-inflammatories I'd been taking for the past six months (and on and off for the past decade), meant that I felt (and looked) permanently hung over. I was exhausted by my body, and by my feelings about my body. Celebrating my birthday—celebrating myself—was the last thing I wanted to do.

It was January. I'd driven north from my home in Glasgow, to a small hill that my friend had told me had a very gradual slope, one that my back could probably manage. I started the day late. Something that wasn't unusual for me. Whether flaring or not, you've always been louder in the mornings—my body needs time to ease into the day.

I arrived at the lay-by my friend had described to me. It was about two in the afternoon. No other cars were there. This was surprising—it was a Sunday. I imagined that other people had already been and left—their walks finished. This thought affected me—I felt foolish, setting out in winter in rural Scotland in the middle of the afternoon. It'd be dark in a couple of hours.

I drudged slowly up what was a very small hill. *Can it even be called a hill?* I asked myself. *It's more like a slight rise in the landscape.* I felt silly and lazy, like I'd wasted the day. Plus, I had to walk so slowly—because of you—that I wasn't even sure I could reach the top of this not-proper-hill before dusk.

I couldn't get rid of the self-critique running through my head—even when my pain isn't really bad, I can't get myself out the flat until gone lunchtime. It'd been nearly five years since I'd accepted that I had chronic pain, and accepted that I needed slow mornings, but it was easy—too easy—to judge myself as unproductive, useless, inefficient, not-a-proper-person.

Partway up, I found a huge boulder. I awkwardly clambered onto it, sat on the cold stone, and hurriedly drank my flask of soup. I pretended to myself that I was enjoying the view of a loch I could now see in the distance. But my shame was

gathering, it had been ever since I'd left my flat. Then, I felt you rise—a loud twinge on the right side of my lower back. A quickening, a stiffening. Not an eruption, but the threat of one. Enough to make me anxious. I looked up, and the sky told me it was probably going to rain. *That's it, I thought, I need to turn back. I can't risk the wet and cold.*

I half-slid, half-fell off the boulder, and started moving down the not-proper-hill. I immediately noticed how stony the path was. I hadn't paid much attention to it on the way up, too absorbed in my self-critique about my laziness. Now I was headed down, the loose stones forced me to hold my body tense against the pull of gravity. This wasn't good for my back. Being too rigid tends to bring you on. I tried letting myself move in a looser way, at times almost breaking into a skip, even a jog.

My feet crunched and slipped on the stones. At first, I worried this would be equally bad for my body, but I quickly realised that if I let my arms flail about to keep my balance, and I didn't head straight down but zig-zagged, my stumbling about was in fact quite a good way of moving. It was easier on my back to give in to gravity a little, to not hold myself too tightly, to not fully control my movements, to tumble. For a few moments, it was almost fun, which was surprising because I had assumed that things like having fun were no longer available to me.

About two-thirds down the not-proper-hill, I crouched to tie my shoelace. It felt good being close to the ground—plus, curving my back over my knees was helpful. So, I stayed there. Closed my eyes. It was like I was finally arriving.

When I lifted my eyelids, I was looking at a large plump black beetle, moving at a leisurely pace across the path. Its blackness glinted, even though the sun was behind a thick layer of cloud. It looked over-sized, almost prehistoric. At certain angles, there was a violet glow. It seemed to shine, which made it look out of place against the mottled dreariness of the stony ground and undergrowth. I later found out from Google that it was likely a Violet Ground Beetle.

Relieved I hadn't trodden on it with my chaotic steps, I watched this creature amble along with its six legs over the tiny stones—each stone like a towering boulder for it. Some stones were four or five times its size—enormous rock formations in its way. It moved around the largest ones, but mostly it clambered over whatever it found, half-falling off. And it didn't move in a straight line—it went in all sorts of odd directions, at times almost going back on itself. Sometimes, a step with its thin black legs did nothing more than push itself forward and back again, having found no grip.

At first, I thought, *how inefficient*. But this beetle clearly didn't care about that thought. It was in no rush—moving at its own pace.

At one point, it paused, as if frozen. Its little antenna stretched up and out. *Maybe it's trying to suss out why there is a giant human crouched down staring at it, I thought to myself. Perhaps it's frozen with fear? Maybe it's completely overwhelmed and doesn't know what to do?* But, suddenly, it moved again, continuing on its way, seeming to ignore me, perhaps assuming my enormous face was the sky.

I stopped minding that it was going to be dark soon and might rain. I stayed close to the ground, letting my knees and hands rest onto the stony surface. I needed to spend more time with this bumbling little animal.

It was now attempting a stone that had a pointy tip, and as it reached the top it fell and flipped onto its back, struggled a bit, seemed hurt and stuck. I wondered whether to help it. But it quickly found its way back onto its legs, had a little rest, and carried on. It was harder than it looked.

I was absorbed in the details of how this creature moved. It was clumsy and messy, but it seemed confident in its own clumsiness, at ease with its own messiness. And it wasn't discouraged when it couldn't move easily over a stone—it didn't seem to mind that there were constant barriers to its path. It simply moved across or around, fell over, took rests, and carried on, not knowing what was next. Plus, there was momentum to its movements—it was getting somewhere. It just kept going, like it trusted that its unclear path was taking it where it needed to go.

Suddenly, relief was washing over me. I loved this beetle. I loved that it was finding its way, not despite its messy movements, but because of them, and that it treated the stone barriers simply as part of its path.

It clambered on, reached the edge of the path, and disappeared into the undergrowth. And I stood up, smiling.

I continued down the not-proper-hill. It started to rain, but I didn't care. I was enjoying my inefficient arm-flailing-walking-skipping-zig-zagging-movements even more now. I'd been encouraged. Out of breath, I stopped my momentum with my hands meeting the side of my car. A spontaneous call rose out of me—*woo-hoo*.

As I drove back to Glasgow, I couldn't stop smiling. It was like my body was smiling at me. And it kept on wanting to smile at me over the following week. So I let it.

Throughout so much of my twenties, I'd felt like I was just stumbling about my life. Your presence meant I lacked proper clarity about the direction I was going in. And I spent so much time resenting my unproductive ways. I never fulfilled the concept of a full day, a proper day, a working day, anymore. The shape of my days - and my life - could feel pretty pointless.

But, I thought, what if my stumbling about—how I must take it slow and improvise my days with the unpredictability of you—is how I get to where I need to go? Maybe my days don't need to be less messy and more productive. Maybe my chaotic body—its inefficiency—is a good way of moving through the world, a good way of finding my path?

As these thoughts grew inside of me, it was almost like I was having a party inside my own mind. The beetle and its movements had given me a way to celebrate myself—and even, at least momentarily, to celebrate you.