Before we begin our walk, I want to consider its likelihood. A walk presumes an able, mobile, fluid body, but there are also unmanageable bodies in this world, those that flail or twitch or stim, abundance overflowing form, negating stillness. I want to tell you about the nonspeaking autistic poet Tito Mukhopadhyay, who types gorgeous lines like “the yolk of the sun was scrambled,” but can’t speak them, can’t will the sensorimotor chaos of his body into sufficient vocal organization. In other words, he can’t harness his own voice. He writes but does not speak. And long after he was an accomplished writer, having published his first book at thirteen years old, Tito still couldn’t meet a simple benchmark of independence: tying his own shoes. He was stymied time and time again...until he learned to harness his fingers with the formal patterns of poetry. And to do this he borrowed the voice of William Blake. With incantatory tetrameters filling his mind and bracing his body, Tito’s arms, his hands, his fingers finally found the focus necessary to tie his shoes. Who says poetry isn’t practical?

Reach down and untie your own shoes. Let the laces hang weary for a moment, as you imagine what it feels like to be incapable of retying them. Now, as you listen to this poem by William Blake, as you reform the loops and knots of your laces, feel its meter course through your fingers (Sound of the poem circles the listener):

*Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,*<br> *Who countest the steps of the Sun:*<br> *Seeking after that sweet golden clime*<br> *Where the traveler’s journey is done.*

*Where the Youth pined away with desire,*<br> *And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:*<br> *Arise from their graves and aspire,*<br> *Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.*

We measure the meter of a poem by its feet: iambs, dactyls, trochees, and, in the case of Blake’s Sun-flower, anapests. Two unstressed syllables followed by a single stressed syllable. This is also the Blake poem that took possession of Alan Ginsberg, in his small Harlem apartment, and turned him into a poet. Like a seed of spirit, he said Blake’s voice jumped into his own mind and took residence there, flowering over many years. When I was a junior at Carleton, in 1999, the voice that possessed me belonged to Robert Creeley. And there has been a strong tradition of award-winning poetic voices among Carleton’s own alumni over the past 20 years: Michael Bazzett, Ted Mathys, Amanda Nadelberg, Aisha Sabatini Sloan, and Faisal Mohyuddin, among them.

In today’s England only poems are measured in feet, but that wasn’t always the case. The foot, historically, has been an unstandardized international measurement used by the Greeks, Romans, French, English, and even Chinese. And this practice, of using the
human body as a basis for measurement, predates all of these cultures. Using the body to quantify space is called anthropic measurement and as long as there has been language there have been humans describing distance by foot, step, and stride.

Most of us assume the foot is twelve inches because of some royal boot in the Middle Ages and though it’s true an inch was originally the width of the king’s thumb, the Internet tells me a foot is twelve inches because that’s actually the average size of a man’s foot. (Sound of typing on a keyboard.) But the Internet also tells me the size of a man’s foot is 15.3% of his height and the average height of an American man is 70 inches, which means the average foot length is just about ten and three-quarters inches. The Internet, as usual, disagrees with itself. But it just so happens that I possess a true and royal foot, exactly twelve inches in length. My foot is, doubly, a foot. Look at the distance from your wrist to the inside of your elbow. This distance rhymes with the length of your foot. Place your foot on your forearm, with your heel tucked against the inside of your elbow and your toes terminating at your wrist. It’s almost as if someone designed it that way.

Now, if you can, stand up. Straight ahead of you, in the near distance, you can make out a large boulder. We will begin our walk by heading there, starting to your left. (Sound of footsteps.) I’ll keep talking as you walk, your feet inside mine, these phantom steps keeping time, as our body’s fall into a single rhythm.

George Bataille, perhaps the most visceral of all philosophers, describes in his writing how we measure the distance between ourselves and our primate ancestors. He writes also of the foot’s great paradox, being at once the source of our proud uprightness and the reminder of our base animality:

*The big toe is the most human part of the human body, in the sense that no other element of this body is as differentiated from the corresponding element of the anthropoid ape…This is due to the fact that the ape is tree dwelling, whereas man moves on the earth without clinging to branches, having himself become a tree, in other words raising himself straight up in the air like a tree, and all the more beautiful for the correctness of his erection…But whatever the role played in the erection by his foot, man, who has a light head, in other words a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things, sees it as spit, on the pretext that he has this foot in the mud.*

(Footsteps stop.) Now that we’ve reached the boulder look down at the inscription on the plaque. It reads *by horse and by hand*. Just beyond this boulder, in the same direction we’ve been heading, there is a stand of trees encircling a bench. Walk toward them. (Sound of a horse galloping by.)

One of the ways we have raised ourselves from the mud is to hoist our bodies atop horses, those ethereal creatures of muscle and speed. Man has been intertwined with horse since the outset of the Iron Age and his desire to touch this graceful beast is so great that the measurement for a horse is, in fact, a hand. From toe to withers, the average horse is about 15 hands, while the tallest can reach up to 20. Imagine ten people with their hands stacked, the final thumbnail just cresting the ridge between its shoulder blades. Though biblically a
handsbreadth was measured as three inches, the standard contemporary measurement for a hand is four. Now that we’ve arrived at this shaded stand, eyeball the measure of your right hand, from the knuckle of your pinky to the nail of your thumb, fingers held together. Is it biblical or contemporary? Either way, place it against the base of one of these trees, pinky against the root, palm flat against the bark. Now measure twenty hands up the tree until you find the tallest horse.

Continuing in the same direction, walk toward the sundial in front of Laird Hall, and picture a pyramid in your mind.

In measuring and building the pyramids, ancient Egyptians employed their own anthropic unit, the cubit. Whereas a foot covers the span from elbow to wrist, a cubit is based on the length between the elbow and the tip of the middle finger. Essentially a foot plus a hand. A hybrid measurement blending the dignity of the hand with the baseness of the foot. Which brings Bataille to mind once more:

_The play of fantasies and fears, of human necessities and aberrations, is in fact such that fingers have come to signify useful action and firm character, the toes stupor and base idiocy... a given person, ready to call to mind the grandeurs of human history, as when his glance ascends a monument testifying to the grandeur of his nation, is stopped in mid-fight by an atrocious pain in his big toe because, though the most noble of animals, he nevertheless has corns on his feet; in other words, he has feet, and these feet independently lead an ignoble life._

I can think of nothing more noble than a horse. A gallant horse bursting with hands. One is reminded of Cortez cowing the Aztecs with his Spanish mount, however exaggerated or apocryphal. Man on horseback assumes the status of demigod, centaur, that beast arisen from Zeus’s carelessly spilled seed. But the true object of Aztec worship, as we all know, was the sun. And here we have the sundial. We’ve been measuring our days by sundial since Babylonian times, letting the mute sun speak through shadow. The device that casts the shadow is called the gnomon, Greek for the one that knows, that examines. The one who countest the steps of the sun. And far from being a weary sun-flower, the gnomon is typically a steel blade, cutting sun sharp against the flat dial. There are countless variations—polar dial, pocket dial, equatorial dial, reclining dial—but here, outside Laird Hall, we have an “East-West Vertical Meridian Pierced Gnomon Sundial.” A mouthful, at the very least.

A vertical sundial may be said to stand in for the human body, its bronze gnomon dominating the apparatus like a giant geometric bust. And in the case of this sundial, which is also a memorial, it stands in for a very particular body: Laudie Porter. (*A flute begins playing from an upper window of the music building.*) She was a music professor and wife of the interim college president, David Porter. She was also a celebrated flautist. In fact, she was the first president of the Upper Midwest Flute Association, which now features a Laudie Porter Memorial Competition at their annual Flutefest. These days the flute strikes many as quaint or frivolous, but it’s worth remembering that the flute is the oldest musical instrument in human culture. More than 40,000 years ago our ancestors were filling caves in what we now call Germany with the lilting tones of flutes fashioned from mammoth ivory and hollow bird bone.
Now take closer look at the sundial. If you inspect the foot of the base you may discover a second time signature. Whereas Carleton professor Ray Jacobson cast the gnomon in 1991, the column itself dates back to 1909 and was the base of a previous sundial memorial, dedicated to Anna Lincoln, who served as a sort of Mother Superior for Carleton in the late 19th century. This bottom half of the memorial was originally planted outside the chapel, but it became target practice for hockey pucks. So it was moved to a quieter refuge behind Watson, where it was uprooted once again to make way for the Japanese garden. After moliing in storage for several years it was finally transplanted here, outside Laird, newly gleaming with a refurbished head. So, with apologies to these two women, long gone, we have another sort of centaur, casting its double shadow into the present, tirelessly counting its hourly steps.

Laird Hall is also a hybrid, in that it originally housed the science department, the ghosts of a laboratory nested within living literature. And though the sundial is a manifestation of scientific thought, it is often accompanied by a literary epigram, known as the sundial’s motto. Here it reads “Love alters not, nor light, with Time’s swift flight.” You can hear Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116 nested in the beginning, but the line was actually written by Margaret Evans, the Carleton preceptress and English professor memorialized by Evans Hall. Here I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention Laudie Porter’s 1986 obituary, in which she was listed as a dedicated member of Northfield’s Margaret Evans reading group. Double memorial, nested building, quoted quotation. Shadow ventriloquizing the sun. In tracing our relation to the celestial, sundials often partake in the tradition of momento mori. Admonition to live life well in the shadow of death. As one popular sundial motto puts it (Sound comes from Greg Hewett’s window in Laird): “We are all dust and shadow.”

As we continue on in the same direction, toward the front entrance of the Goodsell Observatory, the building with the domed roof, recall that we are all, also, stardust, sparks hardened and elaborated over eons.

When Laird Hall was built, the original observatory, which stood nearby, was demolished and replaced with Goodsell in 1887. When I hear the words “celestial measurement,” an exceedingly silly cinematic reference inevitably begins to unspool in my head. It comes from the 1991 film, Hudson Hawk, where Bruce Willis and Danny Aiello are cat burglars who time their heists by popular song. (Music of “Swinging on a Star” begins playing faintly, perhaps even the audio from the film.) In the scene that I always flash back to, they estimate the time necessary to steal a Da Vinci horse statue from an auction house will take “five minutes and change.” They’ll have to split up, Aiello disabling security while Willis makes the grab, and singing the same song will insure that they stay in synch. They choose Bing Crosby’s “Swinging on a Star,” which Willis clocks as taking five minutes and thirty-two seconds.

Strangely, the heist takes exactly two minutes and thirty-one seconds of screen time and we see and hear Willis and Aiello perform the song in dijective entirety. This is also the length of the Bing Crosby version, originally recorded for the film Going My Way, and winner of the 1945 Oscar for best original song. Why double its length in the mind of the viewer? Is
this a hidden nod to the philosopher Henri Bergson, who famously distinguished between time and duration, the former representing a more innate and elastic experience of life’s passing? I honestly don’t know. In another scene they demolish an Italian castle while crooning “Side by Side.” My point is that a song is also a ruler and because all you need is a voice to sing it, songs also fall under the anthropic umbrella. It took us ______ to walk from the bald spot to the tree, __________ to walk from the tree to the sundial, and by the time we reach Goodsell it will have taken _________ for us to get there. (Insert clips from popular songs.)

But before we arrive, I want to give you just a sliver of information about human culture’s crowning achievement, which found one of its dwindling tributaries in Hudson Hawk. I’m talking about the Aboriginal Australian tradition of Songlines. The most concise way to describe an Australian Songline is perhaps to say that it’s a sung map that lyrically describes the territory it traverses. The song is a living, rhythmic document of the landscape. Just as Zeus’s spilled seed became the centaur, the Aboriginal Australians see the landscape as animated with the spilled seed of their Dreamtime ancestors. When a pregnant woman feels the first kick, it’s the signal that one of the spirit seeds has jumped up into her womb, endowing her child with a particular spirit and Songline. Children are born belonging to one of these lines and as they grow into adulthood it becomes their sacred duty to periodically walk and sing the line. This intermittent performance is necessary for many reasons. It helps tie distant regions and social groups together. In the arid center of Australia, it makes possible the navigation of an otherwise illegible landscape. And most importantly, performing a Songline is considered a duty, as it is said to bring the universe back into existence. This deeply poetic contention is made possible by the unique conception of time in Aboriginal culture, which is seen as simultaneous and overlapping. The “was” and the “is” riding together and inextricable from the landscape they cross.

And here we are at Goodsell, which blasphemed Aboriginal thought by measuring and commodifying time, converting it from the celestial to the terrestrial and chopping it up into monetized units, a process that will perhaps spell the end of human culture altogether. Step inside. (The sound of a telegraph issues faintly from the cabinet where it is held.) In the 1880’s, Carleton’s original observatory began using celestial measurements to standardize time. As the only observatory in the region, it made history as the first to send out time-signals west of the Mississippi. Within a year Carleton was setting time for several railroads throughout the upper Midwest, including the Great Northern and Northern Pacific. A standard, celestially measured time was telegraphed from the observatory each morning. If you consider the commercial importance of Chicago at that time, Carleton was providing essential structure to one of the most complex, robust economies on Earth. And it wasn’t just railroads either. Carleton facilitated a time-ball in downtown St. Paul that dropped at noon every day to keep the city in synch, and when it wasn’t coordinating the railroads, the observatory also established time for the banks and the jewelers. In 1887 Goodsell was built, continuing the work of manufacturing time. In the waning years of the 19th century, Charlotte Willard, a “tall and commanding” mathematician, was solely in charge of time’s distribution, and each of her minute celestial calculations altered the workaday world of millions. If you carefully lift the wooden cabinet that houses the digital clock, you’ll find the telegraph where every day she translated our stars into standard time.
Place your finger on the telegraph. Imagine the stars in your body. Remember that there have been people on this campus measuring time and poetic lines for more than 150 years. Know that before they arrived this land didn’t belong to anybody. Rather, there existed a people who for thousands upon thousands of years belonged to the land. Before colonization, this area was under the watchful stewardship of the Wahpekute tribe of the Dakota. As the Milky Way above mirrors the Mississippi River below, so the spirit of the Dakota people traveled from the stars to be born in the Bdote waters where the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers meet. The Dakota, in fact, refer to themselves as “people of the stars.” As each layer of time falls superimposed into the one before it, imagine us all walking together. Singing together. Forging a chorus across time. Bringing the universe back into existence.

Thank you for walking and thinking with me. For listening. As a token of my gratitude I give you these songs, which can take you anywhere on campus you want to go. (A list of songs and corresponding locations pops up.)