Walking Home

I imagine my father trudging down Ruhla valley to his job in the aircraft-parts factory
scanning the footpath the high land the exit
foreseeing the day he will just walk and walk and never stop

Months later in Gotha prison fearing execution
and in the hospital his face aflame with erysipelas
his right eye weeping I see him losing focus

I replay his escape from Thuringia after US soldiers liberate him
following a line of pebbles like Hansel and Gretel
out of the narrow ribbon valley away from alien forests and mountains

Does he tramp the ancient Rennsteig boundary path?
There is a tradition that the true rambler collects a stone from the river Werra
and carries it to cast in the river Saale

My father carries a case of children's clothes for his sister Louise
when he ventures to hike back to Brittany in April 1945
and will abandon it a few kilometres before the Red Cross picks him up

In the eternal now of him lifting his feet to stride forwards
I intuit his need to break through despite legs swelling like marrows
shucking off constraint testing the openness of air roads borders

Counting his paces towards his sisters
Louise Yvette Denise Marguerite Marie Madeleine his brothers Pierre Yves
to his youth in Liscorno Saint Jean Tréméven Lannebert Californie

He is one of thousands of forced workers walking home across Germany
with refugees and citizens convoys and processions swarming west
in exodus from the dying war a chessboard of trajectories

Their shadows are walkers with no coats and no shoes
ghost columns marched out of camps always away from freedom
falling for ever at roadsides with exhaustion from bullets

My mind criss-crosses in these treads and tracks
mired in ruts and mud a slow lone trek searching for the trail

My father writes his steps in the earth and we walk

we walk

we walk

Jacqueline Mézec