

Walking Around

Sometimes it's loss I want, a slow acid eating
my bones, wife and son gone forever,
loss that would color this moon a sad yellow
and give these houses voices beneath their paint.

I would sleep by day, and my grief,
the thinnest of shirts, would hide me
from nothing. At night: the shrieks of birds,
my wife's heart thrumming in the trunks

of the thickest trees, my son buried
somewhere or falling asleep to voices he's never
heard, pajamas white as baby teeth,
the birthmark under his chin a closed flower.

And maybe before following the night's meanders,
I would glance up at these windows furred
by porch light and frost, where my wife
and son are sleeping now, and try to invent

the darkness where we dream, the three of us,
like plants bedded in a window-box, so intertwined
we no longer hear the song of our leaves,
or feel the tangle and sprawl of our roots.

Larsen, Lance. Erasable Walls. New Issues Press
(W. Mich. U.), 1998.

February 1922: My Father's Conception

Leona, Ershel—names chalked on someone's driveway,
names mapping the erasable walls of the heart.
Paired in loopy cursive, they were supposed to fade,
like memory, like the light from the open doorway
of the Elks' lodge after a Saturday night dance,
couples fanning out across the rutted road.

Certainly, no one was thinking of weddings.
Not Leona, not Ershel. Not the town drunk
who saluted all young lovers, with sincerity
and a bottle from the upriver bridge. Not
the German baker working late, who would one day
offer Ershel a life of ovens and floury hands.

Least of all their Mormon bishop, aged walrus,
snoring now beside his flanneled, pliant wife.
And if it was that night, where did they end up—
Leona's basement, a barn loft? Or maybe
a bunkhouse closed for the winter, the wind
and the rustling of dusty blankets

shuttering them in, as my grandfather,
sad country boxer, clenched his eyes against
this new pleasure, fevered colors swimming
through his head, while my grandmother
whispered to the wall, if I hurry, if I hurry,
if I hurry and wash up with vinegar.

Fisherman Rant

Stupid, the way I'm lobbing this plastic
bubble and fly, a Royal Coachman if names matter,
into a smelly river so my six-year-old can lure
fish we don't want from under a falling-down bridge,

and stupid how mad it makes me, not mosquitoes
or mud up to my ankles, not even yesterday's
fish guts staring at me from the grass like an inkblot
test in lies, till dipping, and treason from some past life—

but the river itself, private and moving
and vaginal: I mean the way it buries all questions
in eddies and silt, then hints that I'm betraying
myself, or something grand and impossible, with each cast,

or maybe it's time I'm betraying, since my father
tied this fly in 1968, over a dry salami sandwich
on his lunch hour at FMC, using not peacock herl as you're
supposed to but a tuft of reddish seven-year-old boy hair,

my hair, and shouldn't there be a statute
of limitations, since how long can you trust
the savvy of a geologist-father who paid Tony the Barber
in dimes for his son's bowl cut, then swept up the curls

into an outdated *Field and Stream*, as if a fly's
color didn't matter then, though of course it did,
and does, since this is the exact fly these know-nothing
chubs are taking, even if it is too hot and my son keeps

crying about peeing his pants during
the hike in, which is stupid since the fish
can't see him, so I tell him so, *and even if they could,*
I say, *they swim in piss and worse, and besides your pants*

will dry and everyone pees himself
sometimes, even your mom, and I cast again
into what must be a tavern of chubs, a whole
drooling masonic lodge full of them, not with a cane rod

and tapered line like my father used,
but with a cracked float and a cast-it-clear-
the-hell-out-there, garage-sale reel, which plonks
like a bad Hail Mary pass, and my son reels in, screamin

German brown, German brown, like this
was salvation, though in fact it's just east Wyoming
off I-80, and another chub, which will make nine I've
clubbed and tossed into the brush, and the swallows

just make it worse, the way they thread
the creosote trestles, trailing pieces of god
behind them but stitching closed any pockets of sky
that might explain this moment, or my left-hander's

bad luck, or why my father, who can't drive
anymore, won't just give me his rods and Medalist
reels, and why I keep worrying about coming back
as a fish or caddis fly or a six-year-old, since I'd prefer

not to come back at all, which is why
I hate Saturday mornings and their nothing promises
of renewal, and if I had a bottle of crusty salmon eggs
I'd pop seven or eight into my mouth—they're not poison

like everyone says—and squeeze them
behind my eye teeth and suck down that briny
taste of death and say to hell with the grace
of these swallows doing their bird thing so well.

Letter to Hieronymus Bosch

It's June, friend, which means I'm staring at a detail from the second panel of your *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Tacky, having you monthed and hanging on my fridge—but also sublime. April equals the Fall. October, Apocalypse. In between, the greens and blues of this world and a chance to test the ends of nakedness.

I'm Eve in a floating apple. No, I'm Adam holding a cluster of berries the size of a side of beef. Or make me one of the hungry sods, leaning with his mouth. Beguiling, this landscape, Hieronymus, but like your upside-down man, buried to his ribs in pond, I need more than a pair of hands to hide

my nakedness. Besides, I can't tell the damned from the redeemed. Is that your intent—everyone suffering the same numbed-out bliss? If only God could fill us with knowledge, or lock our genitals away inside the family bible. If only I hadn't peeked ahead to October—bodies burned, drowned, skewered.

This afternoon I found a mouse with a chewed-off head on my doorstep. What was he guilty of? If tossing him into the field was a kind of prayer, I offered it quickly, but didn't mean it. A single, lazy arc. Later, I washed my hands, checked the calendar, and headed for the jacuzzi. Which I did mean.

June, month of my parents' thirty-second anniversary but no holidays. And this coming week? Bills to pay, potato salad for our C-sectioned neighbor, a root canal. And my wife four more days in Syracuse. No surprise, then, that your lovers inside a giant clam are what I carry from the calendar into the water.

True, I don't know they're lovers. All I can see are three legs and part of a hand. And it's hard to tell about the hand. Is it prying the shell open? Holding on for better leverage? Then there's the stooped guy balancing it all on his back—how long his day, how long this burden of limbs?

Interview

A problem *muy adentro*, she tells him, deep inside her—a metal loop like a piece of Satan, but the doctor who was supposed to remove it on vacation. All the while her hands churning at her belt line like paddle wheels. To this, add crying. And now her question: Can God make her clean with this coiled thing still inside?

This the baptismal interview, this the gringo missionary's first confession from a girl his age. Between them, a scratch on her mother's kitchen table. A paring knife and sliced pomegranate. Is it him, or the room? Some sort of pulsing. He does not want to picture the loop. Or watch the hands churning. He wants to build a church for her out of words, invite her to pass inside. Instead, wounds splay the walls, her closed-eyed lovers squirming the table. He keeps his eyes moving. When he speaks—his voice, but inside him a burning like a flock of birds. *Renewal, font, Jesus*—words that hover, then pass between them. They seem inside out and too small.

He opens his book to a clean page. Writes her name and birth date. Then her city, which he keeps spelling wrong. *La Cisterna*, she says. Cistern. Like this—a vessel, a place of water. She makes a pitcher out of air, and for an instant, the room gathers at her fingers. She holds

before him what nestles inside her. He has crossed some barrier, he knows, this boy who in nineteen years has been with no one but himself. He is saying what sounds like God's name. Asking for something. Darkness maybe. Or blood. He knows it has to do with thirst.

And Also Much Cattle

What did they look like—those cows God
took notice of in sparing Nineveh?
Bland-faced no doubt, eyes big as chestnuts.
Jonah must have loathed them. Jonah under
the gourd, Jonah in his cobbled-together
martyr's booth, sulking and praying
for plagues. Anything to teach Nineveh
a lesson. If not a cracked sky drumming
fire, then leprosy, or wells curdled
with blood. As for the cows, if Jonah
followed their grazing too long, he must
have pictured them fasting again—tricked
out in sackcloth, ashes brindling their sides.
Such cheap theatrics. Didn't real penitence
mean casting yourself into God's mouth,
and waking in the nave of His bowels?
Just you and an acidic soup of sin and rotting
fish. Those three days, they should have
clinched it for him—God's golden boy.
Now Jonah wondered. He tried shutting
his eyes, tried, but the drove wouldn't slow.
All those hooves and splattered flanks.
Cows whose only offering was a little snot
on the muzzle, maybe a cracked tongue.
Cows milling until their moos echoed
across the fatness of the afternoon
like untuned pleas deep inside a fish.

A Missionary Considers His Converts

For weeks, we did nothing but walk
dirt roads and shake hands, saying hello.
We carried bricks for old women, hoed gardens,
put on puppet shows, made five-peso coins
sprout like corn from their children's ears.
Finally, they began opening their doors.

The first was a half-blind cobbler, who gave
us *yerba maté* in heavy mugs, called us sons.
We've taught *campesinos*, store keepers,
the mayor, his three cloistered sisters,
even his mother, who owns the bar and half the town.
And we've baptized twenty-three.

We help them to believe in God, not images,
then we ask for their statues, their false books.
Today, after just three visits, we walked away
heavy as pack horses, unloading everything
in our backyard along the fence—Saints and angels,
wooden Madonnas, a crucifix worn brown by kisses.

Looking out at the clutter, Elder Hansen started
to laugh. Three months out, but already happy
in this work, teachable, never imagining a world
without God. Why not burn it? he said.
And I nodded, imagining statues melting in smoke,
the whole superstitious mess dumped

into a shallow grave beneath our window.
But tonight, awake suddenly, my belief
a borrowed shirt too long in the sleeves,
I feel like saving them. Above me, cold stars.
While here, along the fence, washed in moonlight,
smile gods I can hold in my hand.

She

After John Ashbery

She owns a freshly dunged garden and knows what to bury there.

She, with those teeth and ankles.

She leans stiffly into the wind, pure hypotenuse, and mathematicians measure her backbone.

She only sometimes wears socks.

She before spring run off, after the invention of peaches.

She, babysitting late, sneaks a look into the reproduction drawer.

She prefers to sleep in a house made of cards.

She is only rarely a noun.

She prefers that the cards face in and show royalty in doric undergarments.

She bathes the twins in a tub floating with blue dinosaurs.

She whispers *Eve* at every celebration, including volcanoes, because it is spelled the same backwards.

She invents an alphabet out of longing and Malaysian postage stamps.

She, with shaved head, during lap swim, counting tiles and difficult half-truths:

She warms her Christmas bed with a borrowed blow dryer.

She recognizes in a dying fig tree at dawn an exact mistranslation of sadness.

She is the Ur text, the last remaindered copy.

She forwards all prayers and Wzs straight to Lesbos, or is it Patmos?

She, he said, I'm telling you, she and no one else, she she she.

She smuggles in dualities with the cilantro.

She considers Sunday mornings and a mound of white irises sufficient.

She remains highly theoretical.

She is the laminated bookmark moved from *Ecclesiastes*, to *The Prince*, to *Architectural Digest*.

She tunes the Celestial Top 40 by rubbing her navel.

She prefers broken kore figures to conceptual art.

She he she he she he she.

She can't make up her mind between Elvis and Mozart.

She on a Cleveland park bench reading Nietzsche but preferring jicama and crows.

She no longer believes in blood sacrifice.

She, lost in the poem in the spirit in the flesh.

She organizes our best thoughts like a Bolivian peasant carding wool.

She winks sometimes from tall buildings.

She signs herself Sor Juana, Simone, Joan of, Billie, whatever.

She has a flotilla of moles that may hasten world peace.

She riffles history for *trompe l'oeil* pleasures that might work at this late hour.

She uses croquet mallets and lipstick as a last resort, and only if promises were made.

She will not be leaving any time soon.

Driving I-70

Late August, windows down, alpine highway
unwinding under a plush, do-nothing sky.
For company, there's a DJ from Cheyenne
with the stoutness of God in his voice.
Listen long enough and each fencepost starts
looking like a radiant Mary. Then flames bloom,
cartoonish and impossible, in the rear-view—
your hammered-together trailer on fire.
First thing: pull over and unhook. Call it
a test case, only everything burning is yours.
Work shirts letting go of their stitches,
letters turning to petroglyphs of ash. Try dirt,
or maybe a hunter's jacket. And if in a slurry
of motion, the afternoon tilts, then slides
away, let it go. Ignore the tattooed trucker
running with a shovel, the extinguishers
and water jugs, the shimmer of voices squawking
How in Hell's name? and *Mercy, mercy*. Wait
for quiet, steam lifting on a broken breeze.
Then look it over—burnt towels and bedding,
pants shorn off at the knee, the melted ganglia
of neckties. Inhale. Is it loss you smell,
or your body's salt burned into something darker
and more pure? Take a few steps. Think of rivers.
Follow the delicate ash drifting over fences
and fields, over a dazed cluster of Holsteins
chewing again what they've already swallowed.

Nest

The things I saved up there—mantis legs, cat fur,
porcupine quills tied with twine. I thought
this was religion. To climb through leaves

and poked apples to the highest bough, to finger
what no one else wanted. Cicada husk,
dried fish tail. Not death, but what it left

behind. I touched tongue to rabbit skull, tasted
the eye holes. So many creeds, and only a crooked
wind and the sulfur glow of the railroad yards

to help do the sorting. Snake skin wrapping
my knuckles, the clink of wisdom teeth, my aunt's.
Worn down enough to make me think of food.

What it might mean to chew. And be chewed.
That divination. Then putting everything
back. Bone puzzle, flesh pieced against fur.

And swallowing as I climbed down—the creature
above and inside me now. Anything left over
circling like a hawk or unanswered prayer.

Funeral Home

Lungs—you could smell them.
He held them like bloated fish,
a big, slithery one leaking brown juice,
the other one puffy and clean and pink.
The good one is Mrs. Daley,
he said, *eighty-four years old.*
This other guy—over two packs
a day, and not even forty.
To his left, scalpels fanned out
like silverware. Behind him,
a power drill with industrial bits.
Even then I knew this was not
about careers. But who cared?
He was explaining the slow dissolve
of the body, how it unlocks
itself to the blade. At the room's
center, a dented steel table
and tubes angling to a drain—
also our questions. How many
bodies a week? Do they sit up?
What if a shotgun, what if a bomb?
Did he have his wife undress
the ladies? Next came the putty
and fake blood and your own choice
of face wounds, gapped open so you
could river a finger through it.
Finally, the refrigerator room
and a draped body on a gurney.
Draining them, he said, *you feel*
this energy, either good or bad.
I've buried them all—alcoholics,
pot heads, convicts. And once,
a prostitute. Spirits of men
leaked right out of her, he said.

It's a matter of accumulation,
what you take in. His voice
lifted me straight onto the table.
Razored me open. He was reaching in.
My stomach. My liver, my kidneys.
Lifting one organ at a time.
I wasn't afraid. I wanted it this easy—
the heart something you could
weigh in the palm, goodness
as simple as turning down a smoke.

Peach

Call it treason, but I'm eating my way
south. Chilean peaches, swaddled in green
tissue. I buy them \$1.79 a pound.
In Kalamazoo, in the teeth of winter.
Tart enough they bite back. By the shape,
this one could be Allende's heart.
I palm it, I lick its seams. Each day
I feel a little more Marxist. The fuzz
part is obscene, so I peel it with my teeth.
I take a long time. Think of peaches
trundled to market on a scooter, peaches
filling a maid's mesh handbag. I once saw
a girl in a catechism dress sliver off
a piece for her brother. Her mouth to his.
I never should have quit the Peace Corps.
I happen to be dragging the wet part
slowly across my cheek. If Congress
would try this, if the President of CBS . . .
I'm ready to donate everything to La Leche
League. I'm taking my first big bite.
I wish I was mestizo and uncircumcised.
I wish I could cozy up beside those sad
Easter Island faces. I want book titles
running up the spine, not down, whirlpools
in the toilet spinning the wrong way.
It's firm, this peach flesh—with threads
of blood and history running through it.
Sometimes I think I'm a she. I want Reagan
to remember everything he never was.
Go ahead, count the letters in his name.
Ronald Wilson Reagan. 666. All the U.S.
can offer. South is always better.
Chickens in bed with you, a llama watchdog.
I'm dribbling peach juice and learning

to disembowel with a toothbrush. I wish
San Martín could heal in English, that penguins
would teach me how to carry eggs. I'm
investing in copper futures and madly
trilling my r's. On my taxes I claim
children named María de la Purísima and Jesús.
And now I'm down to the pit, which I'm
biting. An entire hemisphere in my mouth,
Pablo Neruda between my teeth. I'm listening
with the ear of a Mapuche Indian. Closing
my eyes to speak. *Hetcha batgutcha sitza.*
Rough translation: eat bat guano, America.
All made up, I admit. But I *want* their talk.
I *want* those tough SOB's on my side. I blow
my nose and whole soccer teams fly out.
I will show this to every kind of doctor.
I wish Gabriela Mistral had nursed me.
When I marry, it will be for exquisite
black eyebrows and wide hips. When I
conceive, I'll burn white, then red,
then redder. This peach sweet as seven Edens
and a peasant virgin. Sweet as Chilean
cowboys. Already, it's churning inside me.