For a Walk

I.

Lease signed, furniture arranged, plates unpacked, dishwasher tested, half a dozen still-unopened boxes stacked in the bedroom closet, and at last there is the matter of the walk. I open the door – my door – and step out. The darkness holds enough warmth to raise a sweat. From somewhere, there comes the after-sunset smell that means spilled lighter fluid and settling ashes and the night’s last beer, even though none of these scents is quite discernible on its own. In all of this I feel welcome. I feel the promise of this new neighborhood. I jog a few steps across the gravelscape that separates the door to the apartment – the door to my apartment – from the street, and I look left, and I look right, and neither direction beckons more than the other. I remember the joy of this moment. For a week, for a month, whenever I go out for a walk, I am nothing more than a discoverer. If my thoughts are interrupted by an unexpected cul-de-sac or by the crawling underskin chill of nerves raised by streets where shattered bottlescaping replaces gravelscaping or lawn, then I have learned something still. There is pleasure in abandoning oneself to the tracing of the contours on the map.

II.

Boxes collapsed and stored, postcards tacked to walls, stove dirtied enough to warrant a cleaning, a friend invited for a glass of wine, bathtub finally used on the one night cool enough for it, and summer has loaded its heat into asphalt and sidewalks. When I step out, the warmth is thick enough to swallow. The map has divided itself, now. From my door stretch walks which seem as distinct from one another as countries on different continents.

To the left: two blocks, and a right turn, and through the tunnel that crosses under the freeway. There, the zoning laws become freer. The asphalt breaks and gives way to a network of private roads, some once-paved, some never-paved, some less roads than absences-of-trash. This walk requires its walker to guide himself, past overgrown tamarisk and saltbush, through sagging chain-link fences, over old flood channels cut into open stretches of ground. Some
houses, here, have been abandoned, and some are fuller than they’ve ever been, home to young Latin American men desperate to be in this city, home to young Eastern European women desperate to be anywhere else. A walker can duck through holes in fences and peek through the windows of sheds and outbuildings, and there he can find crowds of refrigerators, jumbles of scrap metal tangled floor-to-ceiling, well-kept horses sleeping in clean hay. If he wants to, a walker can connect the most beautiful places to one another, can look in on horses and follow a flagstone path around the property of the house with the butterfly garden and the wind chimes and end his walk on the far side of the vacant lot at the top of the hill, the lot with the view of the mountains beyond. If he wants to, he can connect the ugliest places, can pick at the rust of the abandoned RV, can carve his name into the burnt wall of a house that caught fire, can dodge nails and screws on the grounds of construction sites, model houses left half-built on spec that failed to fulfill its promise. This walk instructs its walker to choose a lesson from so much debris, but choosing is hardly difficult, there.

Or, to the left: ten blocks, past the cavernous glare of a strip-mall parking lot, and a second left turn, across a six-lane road. In the neighborhood there, sprinklers and lawn swallow the noise of the thoroughfare behind. All that is audible is the hum of money, cars purring, unmolested by the screeches and clicks that signal poor repair, hedgerows echoing hours afterwards with the buzz of electric trimmers. Old mulberries catch the wind, and the whisper of broad leaf rubbing against broad leaf makes the air feel cooler, somehow, makes the sound of shade, so that even at night a walker feels sheltered from everything above, everything outside. In that neighborhood, the streets meet each other at right angles, and the blocks, dozens of them, speak with the same vocabulary: the machined buzz of the lawns and hedges, the whisper of the mulberries, the driveways protected from the dripping-down of motor oil. Every block looks like every other block, and any turn could be any other turn. This order inspires the walk and frees it from itself, gives a walker a measure of space to think, to be safe in so much near-quiet, whatever the truth, whatever the noise, of the neighborhood’s happiness or sadness, hidden behind garage doors, always closed, muffled by curtains, always drawn.
Or, to the right: four blocks, and a left turn, and at night a hop over a wall. In this stretch of space, the city council has developed an old watercourse into a public park where the acid scent of puke always rises from the remains of one-shot-too-many. Concrete paths wind through stands of bulrush. The turns come so frequently that they lose meaning, and the walk loses its direction and dissolves into time that proceeds not in seconds or minutes but instead in surprises, groups of greasy mallards startled awake, already-cracked plastic broken further underfoot, the shuddering horror that accompanies the resolution of what had been an inorganic form – some sod, a rock – into the shivering or yawning of a homeless man or a destitute woman. The panic of disorientation stretches seconds into minutes, minutes into hours, but the calm of not being afraid of being lost can squeeze hours into minutes, too. A walker might emerge after fifteen minutes convinced of the lateness of the hour, taken by an awareness of the need to sleep, or he might emerge after two hours, cognizant only then of the lateness of the hour, startled by the sight of the moon so far from the spot where he’d thought it should be, worried by the proximity of morning but thrilled at the evaporation of so much time, the dissolution of so much self into such welcoming oblivion.

Or, to the right: two blocks, and a right turn, and between always-open gates once kept closed by a guard paid by a homeowner’s association, since dissolved. Here, the roads curve with leisurely sweep, and the houses sprawl but keep low to the ground. This is suburb consumed by city, suburb of Oldsmobile’s with deflated tires abandoned in driveways, suburb of old men who have forgotten what this neighborhood used to be, of young mothers who have never known. Every house, here, was once identical to every other house— an ornamental well out front, a semicircular driveway, a porte-cochere shading the kitchen door, a front door with an oval-shaped window fitted with the same stained-glass, two gila woodpeckers nesting in the trunk of a saguaro, a row of ornamental sandstone boulders along the house’s street frontage, an olive tree behind shading the backyard gate. But the houses are different, now. Porte-cocheres have been converted into garages, have been replaced by spare bedrooms, have burned down, scorched beams unremoved from their concrete bases. Ornamental wells have been repaired, or they’ve been dismantled, bricks taken and reused.
to build mailbox-stands or ramps for skateboarders. Lawn has given way to gravelscaping, to Astroturf, to bare dirt. This walk cannot know whether its walker should dream of that time, then, when a developer’s vision could be replicated again and again and again, when purity of vision was possible, or whether he should celebrate this time, now, the pieces of that vision scattered, their trajectories traced into good repair and bad repair, into health and worry. This walk cannot be certain, given the lazy meandering of roads that intersect without reason, whether it is a walk that has somewhere to take its walker, or whether it is a walk that exists only in delirious aimlessness, whether this neighborhood means something, or whether this neighborhood is nothing but a beautiful trap.

My sweat is up enough to hold the polyester tag of my t-shirt to the back of my neck. I close my door and lock it, and I step across the gravelscape. I turn right, and before I’m able to settle on my opinion of this evening’s weather, comforting heat, aggravating heat, I turn right again. I’m facing the rusted-open gates of this neighborhood I can always imagine making mine, this neighborhood I can never understand.

III.

Two coworkers invited over for dinner, the dishevelment and sweat-limpness of sheets gone too long unwashed, an overused air conditioner fixed by a landlord only after too many complaints, a four-a.m. stumble home from a night of celebration with a boss and three new clients, compact fluorescent light bulbs installed throughout, and summer tires of itself and wanders away southwards. I have lost the fear of scorched fingertips that made me approach my doorknob with hesitation, and the question of long pants is a question again. Jeans rolled twice at the ankles, shoelaces tightened and reknotted, I brush past the desert spoon blooming in the gravelscape and turn right, and turn right again.

This is the walk I always take, now, because the others I used to take – through the curtain of urine-stench hung across the entrance to the tunnel under the freeway, past the strip mall that still housed a Circuit City when I moved here, into the park where I once found a mouse whose desperation
for sweetness had trapped it inside a mostly-empty two-liter bottle of Coke – were too easy to know. Freedom, order, madness. This neighborhood, though, ranch houses, estates, is sprawl and emptiness and authenticity and charm, and I can never predict precisely what I might come across, here. Two weeks ago, in weekend daylight, the streets lined with the trash left out for Monday dawn pickup, I found a metal garbage can filled with half-melted plastic toys, trikes, dollhouses, waterguns, shapes deformed and colors denatured. Three days ago, in weekday twilight, I tripped over a little plaque left at the edge of the street. I picked the thing up, not knowing whether it had been discarded or whether it had been lost or whether it had been placed on that spot with some sort of purpose. On the plaque were a picture of a dog and a sentimental poem about a dog’s certainty of admittance to heaven and three little locks of fur cut from a just-euthanized body, seal gray, silk white, dull black. My speculations about these things are fruitless. These toys, this fur could say anything – were the toys burned intentionally? was the dog old when it died? – but they say, it says nothing. The muteness of the things I see leaves me mute, too. I am lost in specificity. So I return home and come back again a day later, three days later, at night, before sunrise, sometimes.

Tonight, the gates offer me a string of half-deflated balloons struggling against gravity, a Xeroxed sign pointing the way to a party that must have happened a night ago, or earlier, and I follow the curves of the streets until I reach the house. Another sagging balloon, held by its remaining helium halfway up the length of its tether, is tied to a mailbox. The recycling is out, and in the bins I see eighty or a hundred empty beer cans, ten or twelve drained wine bottles. Was this an engagement party, a wake, a twenty-first birthday party, a fourteenth birthday party, the celebration of a promotion, the celebration of a divorce? Who sorted and carried so many cans, so many bottles, from kitchen garbage can to curbside bins? What might that person have thought about so much aftermath? Was he taken by morning-after melancholy, convinced by the trash that the best world is the world that has vanished, that the cans’ emptiness was a symbol of the emptiness of everything else in the world, drained and cast-off, life transformed into artifact? Or might he have turned his attention from the trash to the pleasantness of the morning? Did he look at the evening primrose near the garage, and did
his hangover give way, for half a minute, to a little thought about the continuously-renewed wonder of the world, about joy, the infinite trellis of the world, up which we cannot stop growing?

I can guess the answers to these questions, and I can invent answers of my own, but I cannot be certain of those answers, cannot even be just-certain-enough to believe them. Other places, I am able to know, verb intransitive, even if I cannot know everything, verb transitive. Here, I am capable of neither.

IV.

A string of sixteen-hour days spent at the office, a stack of empty frozen-pizza boxes piled under the sink, vegetables gone bad in the refrigerator, houseplants dead for lack of water, carpets left unvacuumed for too long, and the scent of rot and dust is everywhere, but at least I can leave windows open to let in new air, now. Autumn has filed down the edges of the days, and I try to wander out-of-doors whenever I have the chance to. Keys in hand, door locked, I turn right, and I turn right. The sky – crowded elsewhere by the rooflines of apartment complexes, of two-story houses – opens and flattens, and again I find myself suspended in familiar confusion, of time, of detail. The sense is one of despair.

I pass an arsonist’s dream of a palm tree, an intensely brushy thing, and I wonder whether the it’s meant to look like that, a shaggy beast kneeling, or whether it’s been abandoned, whether, somewhere a pair of hedge clippers sits forgotten, blades rusted together. I pass the spot in the road where I nearly stepped on a scorpion, once, where I stopped to stare, where I stood for minutes, waiting for the scorpion to move, wondering whether it would have stung me if I had stepped on it or whether it would have stayed still even as it died underfoot. I pass the house whose ornamental front-yard fountain is always dry, and I wonder whether the house’s owners could still turn the thing on, if they wanted to. Lining every street are landmarks of my inability to do as much as suppose I know anything, and when I walk past them I am stuck asking myself the same set of questions. I follow the sweep of this road and turn into the next street I come to, and I see a man standing in his lawn.
“Hey,” he says, pleasantly enough, as though he’s been waiting for me. He’s wearing scuffed black basketball sneakers and cutoff sweatpants that stop just above the knee, and his Super Bowl XXVI t-shirt is faded and stretched. He’s thirty-five, maybe. “Why’d you come from that way?”

“Sorry?” I slow down, a little.

“Bus stop would’ve been closer if you came from that way.” He points in the direction I’m walking.

“I don’t think you—I’m not sure I—”

The guy starts laughing, and I start laughing. I’m relieved that he’s relieved, that he’s recognized that I’m not whoever he had supposed I was. I’ve passed his house, walked past the edge of his lawn, and now my shoes are raising dust from his neighbor’s gravelscaping.

“Alright, then. Take care,” I say.

“Fuck, man, come on, buddy. Come inside,” he says, still laughing, a little.

I crane my neck so I can face him, but I keep moving. “I’m really not,” I say. “I’m really not whoever. But sorry.” I turn again and already my eyes are fixed on the sky, cirrus clouds racing in ahead of the next front.

I know that I could stop, could try to chat, I know that I could try to figure what was what, determine who I had been meant to be, but that isn’t what I want to do. I want to be enough, on my own.

“Whatever,” the guy shouts at me. “Faggot.”

V.

An offer of promotion extended, the possibility of reassignment to a new city hinted at, a stuttered request for a little time to think, a day spent at home, and I wonder whether I need to begin cataloguing a set of objects and memories from my time here that will be able to generate nostalgic feeling three years from now, five years from now, that will be able to sustain the weight of deathbed reminiscence. But nostalgia is easy. A failed attempt at bonsai gardening, a season of overdrinking, a couple of nights out with an acquaintance who later died—from those things any person can build a world. I wrap an unneeded scarf around my neck—the trees have shed their leaves, though the air is hardly chilly—and I step out. I lock my door, and I turn right, and I turn right.
There are houses for sale, in this neighborhood, that I might be able to buy, foreclosures with moldy insulation I might squeeze meaning from for years. But there are houses in other cities, too, cities where my firm has offices, and I could live in one of those places, in a snowy city with brick sidewalks, in a city whose town council members are mad for flowers, where spring whispers in freesias and summer shouts in millionbells, where autumn and winter hide in greenhouses and orangeries. I keep walking. Someone’s car has been broken into. A spray of green-tinted auto glass catches afternoon light in a crack in the road. The street I’m walking on is Wagon Wheel Trail. The sky is empty. The houses are shingled. I can see a couple of pick-up trucks, a few coupes, a station wagon, a dirty RV parked in a driveway. Two dogs bark at me when I walk past their stretch of cinderblock wall, though I can’t see them and am not certain how they know I am passing. I can continue seeing, continue noting. There is a bullet casing in the mouth of a culvert. Two mourning doves sit on a branch, a hand’s width separating them from each other. I can see, but I cannot name anything here, cannot fix description to purpose, cannot remember. I don’t understand why. Is this the world, this ununderstanding, or is it something alien, or is it just confusion? Should I give myself to this? Can I hope to understand, some day, or should I never hope to understand? Or should I run for magical elsewhere?

Two days later, I step out of my house and lock my door. I walk from my front step to my car, and I drive to work, and I knock on the window of my boss’s office. I am honored to accept my promotion, I say. And might I take my new position in some other city, some other country, somewhere better than this?