

Pieces of April

From the Life and Journal of Lance Larsen

Lance Larsen and Casualene Meyer

Lance Larsen, BYU professor of English, completed in May 2017 a five-year appointment as Utah's poet laureate. BYU Studies is pleased to present a series of journal entries from Professor Larsen, preceded by a conversation between Larsen and BYU Studies poetry editor, Casualene Meyer.

Poetic Authenticity and Lived Experience: A Conversation with Lance Larsen

Casualene Meyer: Let's start with a question about your interest in journal entries. One rarely thinks of them as a medium for public consumption. Yet here you are publishing a selection in *BYU Studies*. What do they have to offer?

Lance Larsen: That's a question I've been asking myself ever since I submitted them. In fact, I still have misgivings. What happened was this: I was thumbing through my journal, which I rarely do, when I came across a sequence that held together better than most. Together, these entries had the look and feel of an extended collage. We almost never see journal entries until someone is either dead or famous. I happen to be neither. Why not change up the nonfiction one finds in an academic journal? So I submitted them.

CM: Have you always kept a journal?

LL: In junior high, my older sister gave me one as a Christmas gift, and I've been keeping one ever since, often erratically, with months

between entries. I have students who are much more consistent. In fact, one has written every day for eight or nine years. She puts me to shame. Still, I feel an impulse, maybe even a mild compulsion, to account for my days on this planet.

CM: Do you have any favorite journal writers?

LL: Too many to name, though I'll mention a few. Virginia Woolf, Thoreau, St. Paul of Tarsus (I'm counting his epistles as a kind of journal writing), an Austrian writer named Peter Handke. I was especially taken by the journals of John Cheever, which I first read when they were excerpted in *The New Yorker* in the early nineties. Cheever was a wildly successful short story writer and novelist in his day. He was also a conflicted Catholic, alcoholic, and suffered through a mostly unhappy marriage. All of which comes out in the journals—such brutal honesty. But at the same time, he wrote movingly about his buried and conflicted religious life. I found the entries both exhilarating and immensely sad.

I also have a soft spot for more documentary journals. Take for instance the day-to-day perspective of Samuel Pepys living in seventeenth-century London. Or the harrowing account of Mary Goble Pay (Marjorie Pay Hinckley's grandmother), who crossed the plains with the fated Martin Handcart Company. She was thirteen years old. And she lost her mother and two siblings and had to have her toes amputated because of frostbite. Journal entries tend not to be as pithy as poetry or as ruminative as essays, but they capture the *nowness* of human experience like no other genre.

CM: What's the relationship between your journal entries and your poems?

LL: I wish I could say something dramatic here, like journals are the rough draft of everything I write. The relationship is much more glancing and accidental than that. Sometimes I'll get lucky and find a journal entry that I can "English" into a poem after numerous drafts. More often than not, journal entries provide a window into the importance of noticing. They provide a glimpse into the inner life, a lived perspective that clarifies the creative process—sometimes obliquely, sometimes in a direct way. For instance, John Steinbeck kept a journal while writing *The Grapes of Wrath*. His insights make the novel richer and more human and the man himself much more appealing. He captures perfectly the self-doubt one has to overcome to tackle and keep tackling such a mammoth undertaking as a novel.

- CM:** If journal entries only rarely result in viable poems, what do you do to keep the poetry coming?
- LL:** Besides trying to read myself silly and learn from other arts, especially the visual arts, I try to “make it new” formally. I’ve fallen in love with the ode and pantoum and triolet. And during downtime, that is during piano recitals and bus rides and sitting in waiting rooms, I constantly fiddle with aphorisms. If poetry teaches one to think in image and metaphor, aphorism adds to the mix paradox and reversal and extreme distillation. To paraphrase Allen Grossman, an aphorism is a genesis and apocalypse in the same helping.
- CM:** What do you find most appealing in aphorisms? I mean, most people, if they know the word at all, think of aphorisms as a little stuffy—what you might find in a tattered quote book. Or as cute sayings on a mug.
- LL:** I get that reaction frequently, sometimes from very good students. I like to point out that some of our best minds couldn’t leave them alone—not only Bacon and Nietzsche, but also Dickinson, Oscar Wilde, and Walter Benjamin. Once you dip into aphorisms with some regularity, it’s hard to stay away. They have bite, and they endure.
- CM:** Care to share some examples?
- LL:** One of my sassy favorites comes from Cicero, which has immediate relevance today: “Politicians are not born; they are excreted.” I’ll leave it to the reader to name names. In a similar vein, contemporary aphorists expose foibles that have always been with us, as in these lines by a youngish Canadian poet: “The bushier the moustache, the more clichéd the pick-up line.” The local detail might change in an aphorism, but not the essence. And here’s one of my own: “In climbing a new mountain, wear old shoes.” I’m quite sure I wrote it, but it feels as if it has always existed, as if I was lucky enough to pluck it from some mythic wisdom tree. The centuries get erased more quickly in aphorism than perhaps in any other literary form.
- CM:** Let’s back up a bit now: when did you decide you wanted to be a poet?
- LL:** I took a poetry class my last semester as a graduating college senior and quickly realized I was better in lines than sentences, in image and metaphor than in plot. I loved the tweezers-and-magnifying-glass aspect of poetry, everything concentrated and up close. Still, it took me a couple years and a master’s degree to move decisively from fiction into poetry.

CM: It was Leslie Norris you studied with, right?

LL: Yes, which I still count as a serendipitous blessing. He was Welsh and had a gorgeous voice, epic and musical but very intimate, a voice that could turn the Yellow Pages into poetry. Not only was he personally acquainted with towering twentieth-century poets like Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, but at the same time he represented a direct line back to the vatic tradition of poet-prophets in British Romanticism. Going to class was intoxicating. At any given moment, Leslie might be channeling Wordsworth or Keats or Blake.

CM: Are there any other poets you especially admire?

LL: Pablo Neruda, among many. He's on my mind right now, because I had the chance to visit his former homes in Chile over Christmas break, all three of which have been converted into museums. In Valparaiso, one of the workers was wearing a T-shirt that read, "Confieso que he vivido." Translation: "I confess that I lived." Which is the title of one of Neruda's later books. I love the rich open-endedness of that sentence—simple but very packed. Every successful poem—whether his or someone else's—is a confession of what it means to live, what it means to occupy a body and mind in language at a particular moment of time. I love Neruda's amplitude and gusto, his fearlessness.

CM: By my count, Adam and Eve appear in at least three of your poems, including "Denouement": "But what could one flesh / mean to Eve?—who believed the breath / of life was a gift, and herself already whole." Any thoughts about why you keep returning to this first couple?

LL: I have no idea, except to say that their story is our story and has somehow gotten under my skin. Not only is Adam and Eve's fall the foundational story for three world religions, but it's a fascinating archetype as well—lots of mysteries to plumb. I'm particularly interested in the gaps in the story, how for instance Eve seems to be the wiser of the two, or at least the one with the most initiative, but Adam is assigned to do the naming. That seems an irresistible contradiction. I'm also intrigued by the Fall as a love story. Adam and Eve are estranged from each other, but their vulnerability is what throws them into each other's arms, both literally and figuratively. That's what I had in mind, I suppose, when I wrote these lines in "This World, Not the Next":

. . . God folded the garden and hid it
Deep inside the woman, but commanded
The man to tend it. And in due season the man
Eved, and the woman Adamed back.

- CM:** While we're on the subject of husband-and-wife pairs, your domestic poems resist the anger and angst that so often beset marriages. How does your experience with real-world married life inform the vision found in your poems? Would there be a Lance without a Jacqui?
- LL:** Not much of one. Most of my work has some autobiographical dimension to it, though I'm perfectly comfortable enhancing, distilling, grafting together, or even inventing detail for the sake of a poem. That said, the beloved my readers encounter on the page bears a noticeable resemblance, at least in some respects, to the beloved to whom I happen to be married. I want the authenticity of lived experience to inform everything I write.
- CM:** I wonder if you could say something about Jacqui's painting and collage. Her work is featured on the covers of your last three poetry collections, and you have a poem titled "On Being Asked, Have you ever written about Jacqui's paintings?" How does Jacqui's work influence yours and yours hers?
- LL:** I can say that the painterly lens through which I see the world has been largely shaped by Jacqui—not just her art work but her sensibility. I love the work of Vermeer, Joseph Cornell, the Abstract Expressionists, and Squeak Carnwath partly because I've seen these artists through her eyes. At the same time, she's picked up on the tone and cadences of poetry, and she's starting to include snippets of poems in recent paintings. Most importantly, we talk art all the time, whether it be theater, jazz, art happenings, or the recently discovered street photography of Vivian Maier. What a luxury to be able to talk shop with the one you love, and to sometimes collaborate.
- CM:** Recently, you've taken this spirit of collaboration one step further, with your joint show at the Springville Museum of Art. How did that exhibition come together?
- LL:** After collaborating on a show at BYU, we wanted to do a second exhibition somewhere but hadn't settled down and proposed anything. Then one Sunday, on a morning walk in the foothills above Springville, Jacqui noticed two things. First, how richly panoramic

the views were. Second, hardly anyone was outside. I mean no one. Not walking, not strolling, not sitting in their yards, not even in cars. It looked like an abandoned city.

Jacqui decided she wanted to get to know Springville even better than she already knew it, get to know it one street, one quirky house at a time, and to create a body of work documenting her rambles. That's how the title came about—Three Mile Radius—which meant everything within three miles of her basement studio was fair game. Jacqui also decided to include lines of poetry. That's how the collaboration got started. Then we put together a proposal to the director of the museum, and she said yes.

- CM:** Flannery O'Connor once said, "A story really isn't any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase." I feel the same applies to successful poems. Nevertheless, if I were to distill my personal experience with your poetry into a statement, I would say your work is intellectual, humble, humorous, and often documents a fallen world. How would you say this applies to a poem, such as "Winter Takeout," which tells a story about perilous winter driving, a large cinnamon roll, and a moment of accidental contact with a food server?
- LL:** You're right about the "fallen world." It's a clear leitmotif in my work, but I often treat it as if it were a *felix culpa* of sorts—a "lucky fall." Temporary estrangement from God and each other provides an opportunity for loneliness and growth and sometimes ironic celebration. In "Winter Takeout," the fallen world expresses itself in a winter snowstorm and the isolation and danger of driving through it. The narrator pulls into a truck stop for a cinnamon roll. The autobiographical trigger was a waitress touching my waist, as she stepped past me at the counter. This gesture on her part was purely pragmatic—I was in the way, and this space belonged to her—but because I was alone on a long drive in the middle of winter, it registered as something like tenderness.
- CM:** O'Connor has also said that "belief, in [her] case anyway, is the engine that makes perception operate." Talk about how your own beliefs—however you wish to define them—help your poetic perception to operate.
- LL:** If I didn't believe in God, the Fall, Christ's redemption, and an after-life, I would still write poems, but they would be different poems. In summing up what drives my work, a reviewer of my first collection referred to "the gravitational pull of the Divine." That strikes

me as right. He later quotes from my poem “Errand,” which introduces fairly directly the constitutive binary of here versus there: “Your errand, tongue, to know / the exact savor of the world’s flesh / Then to translate beyond it.” That balancing of these overlapping realities, though often camouflaged, operates in all my books and remains a force I feel incapable of ignoring, even if I wanted to.

CM: What role does devotional poetry by other writers play in carrying you forward?

LL: A huge role. You know how you carry around quotes like little lamps? Here’s one by Andrew Hudgins, who writes about growing up in a southern Baptist tradition he no longer practices. He embraces a pluralistic inclusiveness I find illuminating: “I don’t read or write like a Christian. I read as a reader, one who responds to a book or poem—and there is just as much pleasure in being swept away by a humanity that is embodied in a faith one doesn’t share as being swept away by humanity embodied in a faith you do share.”

I read Mormon poets with sympathy and a certain élan—many are friends or at least acquaintances, sometimes former students—but I certainly don’t limit myself to the tribe. Right now I’m teaching a capstone course in which we’re reading Catholics and Protestants, a Jewish writer, a Buddhist, and a sort of secular ventriloquist who sometimes speaks in the voice of God. What remarkable perspectives they bring to the table. One of my favorite poets is Pulitzer Prize winner Charles Wright, who at a reading in Salt Lake referred to himself as “a God-fearing nonbeliever.” And yet his poems are shot through with rich devotional glimmerings. In looking for authentic poetry, you have to trust the poem first, not what the poet says about it.

CM: You are not only a poet but a teacher, which suggests you believe in the value of teaching the art of writing poetry. Your poem “Adding a Ghost-like Hum to Your Inner Life” makes a generous statement: “In this waiting room called Planet Earth, / We are all stenographers of the sublime.” How do students of creative writing and all people who have the desire to write fulfill the measure of their poetic ability?

LL: By writing. I know this sounds like a cop-out answer, but I mean it sincerely. Writers write, and I’m sad to report that many students I’ve taught, including the most talented, simply stop. There aren’t a

lot of social or monetary incentives to keep doing this difficult art, especially when the art doesn't line up with how you put bread on the table. Of course, I think one's art is always worth fighting for. If you continue to read seriously and write with some frequency, the writing itself will guide you. Writing teaches you what you don't know but need to know. Writing will guide you into finding communities that value the words you put on the page.

CM: I understand your current project is a collection of prose poems. Talk about that for a minute or two.

LL: Even seven years ago, I couldn't have predicted my fascination with them. But I found myself wanting to experiment and found some wiggle room in prose poems that I didn't perceive in lineated verse—a more flexible voice, a chance to add to rather than constantly pare away. I'm not saying one can't do all those things in poetry, but I felt I needed to try something new. I call them prose poems, but they're perhaps more accurately lyric paragraphs. Some are essayistic, a handful lean toward fiction, and four follow a strict Q&A format. One piece I submitted to a magazine as a poem but the editor accepted it as a story. Another editor insisted on publishing a piece as an essay, against my (not very vehement) objections. I can't tell you how delighted I am by confusions of genre like this.

CM: Do you find yourself addressing the fallen world in these poems as well? And are any of them religious in tone?

LL: An independent reader probably wouldn't call the collection predominately religious, but I address my usual concerns, perhaps under the radar. Still, some of the titles strike a devotional tone, often in a humorous way: "My Lord Of," "In Toledo, the Sequestered Brides of Christ," "Sad Jar of Atoms," and "Mother Teresa This, Mother Teresa That." My favorite title I lifted straight from the mouth of a kid in my ward who was describing how he imagined heaven: "All Puffy and White, Goldish, Harpy, and Angelonic." Unfortunately, you're not going to find that in any Bible dictionary. Most of these poems are more recent than the journal entries, but I think they ask some of the same questions: how do we make our way through the "wobbly splendor" (that's a phrase from Czesław Miłosz) of this world.

CM: What do you feel you owe your art and what do you feel you owe your readers?

- LL:** To the art, I owe the attempt to not dishonor the tradition. It's hard to imagine a place at the table with the greats, but when my work sits down to supper with poems by Elaine Equi or Phil Levine—that is, when we show up in the same magazine—I hope I wouldn't embarrass myself. What I owe my reader is fresh eyes, new wheels, an immersion in language that ends up changing the way the world looks for twenty-four hours, which was Elizabeth Bishop's litmus test for successful poetry.
- CM:** You're finishing up your five-year appointment as Utah's poet laureate. Any particular impressions? What have you learned?
- LL:** That poetry is alive and kicking in the Beehive State. This is true of K-12 writers, college students, professors, even hobbyists who pour an immense amount of time into the making of poems. There's no shortage of talent in this state. I'm especially heartened by the heavy involvement of Utah high school students in Poetry Out Loud. This is a national recitation competition sponsored by the NEA. I've been lucky enough to be involved in the finals the last several years. No way did I possess the confidence to do that as a high schooler.
- CM:** So poetry isn't going away?
- LL:** Not anytime soon. Someone once asked the poet Richard Howard, who was a member of the Academy of American Poets at the time, what could be done to increase poetry's readership. His answer went something like this: "Poetry has always been a private pleasure. Let's just keep it a secret." Though a little flip, he was celebrating the fact that poetry will survive our puny efforts to promote it. It's not going to compete with blockbuster movies (thank goodness), certainly not in explosions per minute, but it will continue to carry out its secret ministry.

I once read an article that argued that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste-land*, first published in 1922, had a significant influence on British punk bands in the late 1970s. How was such a thing possible? Trickle-down aesthetics. What was edgy and obscure in the '20s entered the mainstream some fifty years later. I love the fact that poetry is both avant-garde and profoundly communal at the same time. When Yeats died in 1939, W. H. Auden wrote a moving elegy, celebrating not just the man but the art itself. The last stanza sums up nicely the rejuvenating potential of poetry:

In the deserts of the heart
 Let the healing fountain start,
 In the prison of his days
 Teach the free man how to praise.

That's what poetry has always done, praise the world and God,
 and ask questions.

Pieces of April: Selected Journal Entries

1 April 2013

Springville

We celebrated Mom's 90th last night in Bountiful at Kris and Carl's—a dessert open house that drew over twenty friends and family. We sang to Jeane, ate cake, buried her in cards, potted mums, and congratulations. All four of our kids were on hand—five if you count Chase, our soon-to-be son-in-law, which we do. A few days ago, after lamenting yet another thing she had forgotten, Mom said, “My mind is like crumbly cheese.”

I'm a day late for channeling Easter properly, but here's C. S. Lewis extrapolating from a line by Thomas More: “If you have not chosen the kingdom of God, it will make in the end no difference, what you have chosen instead.’ These are hard words to take. Will it really make no difference whether it was women or patriotism, cocaine or art, whisky or a seat in the Cabinet, money or science? Well, surely no difference that matters. We shall have missed the end for which we are formed and rejected the only thing that satisfies. Does it matter to a man dying in a desert, by which choice of route he missed the only well?”

We certainly Eastered up the Sabbath: dinner of pulled pork, roasted asparagus, fruit salad, and trifle for eleven; birthday celebrations for Lance and Jewelee;¹ an Easter egg hunt in the backyard; a spiritual thought compliments of Jeff Holland. On top of all that, Jacqui spoke in church, which I missed by ten minutes since I was busy with releasings and callings in two YSA wards in Provo. Her linchpin story was the Paris chocolate caper,² which I intend to roll out myself one of these Sundays.

1. Jewelee is Lance's sister-in-law.

2. The Paris chocolate caper refers to responding with an apology and a gift of chocolate. Lance and Jacqui gave this response to an upstairs neighbor who, they assumed, had sent a harsh note about their being noisy at night in their apartment. The neighbor responded with a gift of exquisite Belgian chocolate, far better than their gift, and told them the management regularly distributed

The strangest thing that happened yesterday was Tessa's³ encounter with the remarkable Honda Odyssey cinch-me-in-for-eternity seat belt. Somehow thanks to her waif-thin skinnyness and contortionist flexibility, she ended up with the belt twisted around her twice. When she released the catch, she was still inside the loop, which cinched tighter and tighter and wouldn't let her go. We tried everything to no avail, and now her ribs were hurting and she couldn't breathe all that well. In the end, I had to rescue her with a hacksaw!

I may as well end in celebration with a passage from Jack Gilbert, whose poems I'm teaching today. From "The Forgotten Dialects of the Heart" sans line breaks: "When the thousands of mysterious Sumerian tablets were translated, they seemed to be business records. But what if they are poems or psalms? . . . O Lord, thou art slabs of slate and ingots of copper as grand as ripe barley lithe under the wind's labor. Her breasts are six white oxen loaded with bolts of long fibered Egyptian cotton. My love is a hundred pitchers of honey. Shiploads of thuya are what my body wants to say to your body. Giraffes are this desire in the dark. Perhaps the spiral Minoan script is not a language but a map. What we feel most has no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses, and birds."

6 April 2013

Springville

Conference Saturday. Jacqui and Tessa are in Lehi for a soccer game. I'm on the stage of the stake center listening to Robert D. Hales. Beside me, Dylan⁴ is nodding off, more like a bobbing toy you put on your dashboard than a priesthood holder. He seems to have survived orchestra tour in California, though clearly he doesn't want to be here tonight. Before, between, and after conference sessions, I was outside taming chaos: pruning the privet hedge, raking, tidying up messy beds.

Tad Callister quoting someone: "Do not die with your music still in you."

Later the same evening. Like everyone else in the stake, Dylan and I sealed our spiritual feast with a physical one. Sonic seems to be the venue of choice, so we ventured further afield—Me Kong Café. There's nothing like massaman curry to heal rifts and lubricate the talk—chicken for me, tofu for Dylan, who is three weeks a vegetarian. We talked about Disney, long road trips, gossipy girls, sushi, astronomy, etc. How relaxed and off the cuff

those notes and that they hadn't disturbed her at all. The moral being that responding with kindness rather than anger makes for sweeter relationships.

3. Tessa is Lance's younger daughter.

4. Dylan is one of Lance's sons.

he was at dinner, how passionate and genuine. I paid the bill, tipping generously, and we headed into the dark. Never mind that we forgot our box of delicious leftovers at the table. In the parking lot, we found an unopened bag of sour cream and onion potato chips. When the front door closes on you, you can usually find a window cracked open in the back.

14 April 2013

Provo

The downside of unmatched Sunday schedules: I'm sometimes finished with meetings as early as 11:30, Jacqui and the kids stagger home at 2:00. The upside of our Sunday schedules, exactly the same thing. Usually it's hunger that hurries me home. Today, because I'm fasting, I have my feet up on my desk here in the JFSB, having vowed to scribble whatever floats across my radar. Think of me as an oversized piece of fly paper greedy for stories, hungry for unclaimed syllables.

Thanks to my daily commute between Springville and Provo, I've managed to keep Benjamin Franklin's career afloat. I'm listening to the last of fourteen lectures by a professor at Texas A&M. Poor Ben, he's still in Paris widowed, in his eighties, having successfully negotiated treaties first with France and now with England. What to do now? He wants to go home, but he has suitors and supporters in Paris. He wants to go home, but he has kidney stones and believes the trip by coach to the coast will do him in. He isn't long for this world. Goodbye to Silence Dogood, goodbye to his tyrant brother in Boston, goodbye to the swimming lessons he gave in London as a teenager, goodbye to *Poor Richard's Almanac*, goodbye to kites and electricity and honorary doctorates, goodbye to a career as diplomat and gadfly and his face on a special line of French chamber pots, goodbye to a fistful of aphorisms that will never go out of style:

"He that lies down with Dogs, shall rise up with fleas."

"Where there's Marriage without Love, there will be Love without Marriage."

"Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead."

"Poverty, poetry, and new Titles of Honour, make men ridiculous."

I was hoping for a trifecta in death by burying Indie's three victims in one grave—what a cat!—but I couldn't find the snake when I needed it, so I laid out the baby robin and mouse, and I'm waiting for the deceased serpent to turn up again.

How jealous I am of young fathers. All of them, even the short ones, are as tall as mountains, none having suffered the pangs of failing their own flesh and blood.

Is reading aphorisms in the shade beside a fountain with a family of quail soft-toeing it behind me decadence or prayer?

Here's a passage from Elder Holland's conference talk last weekend: "When problems come and questions arise, do not start your quest for faith by saying how much you do not have, leading as it were with your 'unbelief.' This is like trying to stuff a turkey through the beak! Let me be clear on this point: I am not asking you to pretend to faith you do not have. I am asking you to be true to the faith you do have. Sometimes we act as if an honest declaration of doubt is a higher manifestation of moral courage than an honest declaration of faith."

Shaving is like writing a poem. You have a mirror, good light, and your blade is reasonably sharp. You make calculated passes till the lather disappears. You think you're finished. Then you touch your face, that new creation, and realize what a shoddy, barbaric job you've done. More swipes, more touching. In the end, all you get is close to close.

15 April 2013

Springville

Dream: I found myself at an art colony which was little more than an open-sided refugee camp with palm leaves as the roof. Too many people crammed into too little space with not enough ideas. Where were the bathrooms and running water? What was I supposed to eat? Was I a collage artist without materials? A poet without a Muse? I kept wandering around trying to find a private spot without any flies.

Six sneezes, new snow, Dylan off to orchestra at 6:30 a.m., taxes paid but Roth IRAs to figure out, Esther and Mordecai saved and all the Jews in the kingdom of Ahasuerus. But what of Haman who plotted against Mordecai and company? He's hung from the gallows along with his ten sons. Oh, and by the way, by official decree the Jews, who have now found favor with Ahasuerus, "slew of their foes seventy and five thousand," which must be acceptable behavior since "they laid not their hands on the plunder." All this followed by feasting. Clearly, I'm missing the point of this story. Wouldn't it be better to be dead than have the blood of seventy-five thousand on your hands?

16 April 2013

Springville

The death toll in Boston has inched up from two to three, with well over a hundred injured, many with their legs blown off. The source of the blasts: a pair of pressure cookers filled with explosives along with ball bearings and nails. All agree this is an act of terrorism, but foreign

Aphorisms for a Lonely Planet

1

Great journeys begin not with a first step but a door left ajar.

2

Wonder is the yeast of the imagination.

3

Gesundheit!—as close as I've come to Nietzsche and Heidegger in months.

4

Can you hear the angels singing? Me neither.

5

Rome wasn't built in a day but that's all it takes an American tourist to see the good parts.

6

Theory is a leaky cup.

7

To climb a new mountain, wear old shoes.

8

One doesn't read Paul Celan so much as consent to be interviewed by darkness.

9

Look at that celebrity soar!—like a worm in the beak of a hungry bird.

10

Attendant at the animal shelter showing me a six-toed cat: "That Hemingway character bred them," she said. "I think he was a writer or something."

11

Fraud or Freud: for seven drafts not even my spell check could tell the difference.

12

Astonish the gods: return that borrowed hammer.

13

One need not be Catholic to have a soft spot for religious vows. Take a certain *chocolateria* in Toledo, Spain: nuns labor behind kitchen partitions where no one sees them, not even the waitresses. Meanwhile, I sit by the window, tasting something ineffable in the hot chocolate, a cloistered wholesomeness lacing the churros. Feed me again Lord with your unseen hands.

14

The older I get the higher I rise—on the Grim Reaper's to-do list.

15

Foolish reader, still trying to use this poem as a mirror?

16

One of those epiphanic moments when I'm so certain the rolling field is my body and the sky is my breathing that I refuse to answer to any epithet but Infinity. Then someone calls my name and I turn.

17

We measure grief not as the crow flies but as the buzzard circles.

18

The womb never forgets.

19

In his nineteenth-century nest-and-egg engravings, the good reverend F. O. Morris always follows the same formatting: nest like a catcher's mitt, egg floating above. But is the egg homing to the mitt or lifting into the sky?

20

Even Rembrandt tried to avoid painting hands.

21

I fill the teapot not to slake my thirst but to be summoned by singing.

22

In triumph or despair, pet a cat.

(Originally appeared in *Southern Review*, *Hanging Loose*, *Great River Review*, and elsewhere)

or domestic? I'm naive enough to prefer domestic, which would make the devastation seem more random and less sinister—lowercase crazy rather than Crazy with a manifesto attached. One of my students, Catherine Bramble, was five hundred feet away when the bombs went off. Safe but no doubt shaken. An eye witness, whatever that means. She should be writing this entry.

Which Naomi should we trust? The Naomi of Ruth 1:20–21: “Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty.” Or the Naomi of Ruth 4:15–16: “And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life . . . for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better than seven sons, hath born him. And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it.” We always trust chronology, we always trust the way the story seems to end. But for most of our minutes we inch along, our stories deliciously unfinished. Which of these Naomis and 10,000 others not mentioned in scripture is me?

According to the history of England I'm listening to, Joseph of Arimathea may have been Mary's uncle and may have wandered 5,000 miles to England and may have planted a hawthorn bush to prove he was there and may have brought Christ along for the ride. Folklore and wishful thinking, of course, which doesn't make the stories less true. What is beyond dispute is that the Romans did set up shop in England roughly two millennia ago and that both *Kaiser* and *Czar* are modern etymological derivations of *Caesar*. Also, the term Caesarian delivery comes from Caesar, who had to be cut from his mother's womb. No mention made of what became of his mother.

Yesterday's snow melted but was followed by a frieze of wetter stuff that takes us back to February rather than forward into spring.

I must be turning into an old man: I found not one pair of reading glasses on top of my head during a recent grading session but two.

Fresh from the shower, cleanliness levels restored to acceptable levels, I felt a crushing need for an infusion of melancholy, so I found Fleetwood Mac via YouTube, more specifically Stevie Nicks crooning “. . . and what you had and what you lost, and what you had . . .” Where do I end the quote, what story do the ellipses tell?

What I jotted down a few weeks ago in response to the prompt “Why do you write?” Because ink on lined paper smells almost as good as a

By Road and Sky

Hit and left for dead, this porcupine. A mess of flesh and entrails in a smear of blood. It jerked a little, then tried dragging itself away. My father pulled over and rummaged in the trunk for something to finish it off. My father was coolness that night. Or was he grace? He straddled that twitching porcupine and raised a tire iron above his head. I watched. Still is was my mother I loved. My mother in the front seat, with her pill box hat and apricot skirt. My mother, with a sleek armada of moles above her collarbone and her left front tooth overlapping the right. She turned away from the slash of high beams across asphalt and the valley opening below.

I was not her first son, or favorite. But the one lucky enough to ride in the backseat that night. The one whose face she used as a mirror to watch my father rain down three shivering blows. She reached for me across the seat, then turned to the radio, as if I or the evening needed serenading. The wedding reception we were late for could wait. And the city juggling its neon promises. And my father explaining that bad driving is to accidents as a tire iron is to mercy. My mother held me. The ghost of the porcupine hovered over its remains, then rose with the moon and drifted south. And the road said *never* and the sky said *always* and both told the truth.

(Originally appeared in *In All Their Animal Brilliance*)

burned match. Because at 5:45 a.m. I'm an empty chalice and words lick like blood. Because writing is less expensive than primal scream therapy. Because I don't have the luxury of marking the world like Sundance, my neighbor's exuberant yellow lab, and thus claiming it as his own. Because palimpsests are truer than birthmarks. Because to erase, one first has to write.

And what do the famous have to say about writing? Katherine Paterson: "I want to be a spy for hope." Mario Vargas Llosa: "The writer is an exorcist of his own demons."

And May, May is waiting off stage, fidgety, with a certain fragrant beauty, like new poems.

"Inventory in a thimble"—my phrase or someone else's? I have no idea.

Nakedness—a garment of skin we put on each time we disrobe.

Today at noon, while I was bidding goodbye to my poetry class in pitas and hummus and pasta salad, Jacqui was up in Bountiful saying goodbye to her Uncle Stan in sackcloth and ashes and a veil. Or at least a dark skirt. If we die piecemeal, Stan had already shed a majority of himself months ago, so his final gesture of stilled breath was closer to confirmation than expiration. Aunt Maren seemed nonplussed by the whole affair. The most memorable part of the funeral, according to Jacqui, was the closing prayer given by a family friend and longtime neighbor. You expect second person in a prayer, but rather than address God, the neighbor gave advice to Stan about how to pass to the other side, then advice to Maren, then to Stan's son, Kevin. Advice that bordered on reprimand. How I wish I had a transcript.

What is the wind but a promiscuous stenographer writing in disappearing ink?

28 April 2013

Springville

Five or six weeks and Dylan is still vegetarian. I thought the decision came largely out of the blue, but today during our Sunday walk I learned otherwise. Just off the trail up Hobblecreek Canyon, we came across a deer carcass likely dead since fall. "This is where I decided," Dylan said. "Cody Woolsey and I shook hands over this dead deer and vowed never to eat meat again." I looked down—bone and hoof, fur, desiccated organs. More the idea of a deer than an actual deer. Symbolically, did the deer represent all the creatures Dylan has eaten during his life?

My Lord Of

My lord of March in Madrid and a desultory stroll through Paseo Park. My lord of buying sweet yams from a vendor and devouring them in their skins, even the burned parts. My lord of green grass springy so I throw myself down. My lord of my daughter reading Jules Verne beside me. My lord of a single feather on the grass, which I send aloft, a numinous novel of the air. My lord of Picasso's *Guernica* in the Reina Sophia Museum four blocks from here. My lord of the wall opposite the painting turning blue every six months, a mystery like statues weeping. My lord of the mystery solved: visitors sliding their jeans against the wall to get a wider perspective on fire raining down on hooved animals and the peasants who feed them. My lord of three million glorious bodies in this city, but all I need is my beloved's. Until she arrives, my lord of impatient waiting, and after, my lord of hugging her like a lost lover, just a few layers of decorum between her electric skin and mine. My lord of a bike thrown down in sand like a gored horse, of cigarette smoke rising ragged and holy. My lord of who feeds these feral cats slinking and where do all the feathers of the world end up? My lord of my achy left leg growing achier on account of my daughter leaning. My lord of fourteen years ago she didn't exist on this planet, neither 20,000 leagues below or above. My lord of right now and not yesterday and maybe not tomorrow—therefore let her lean. My lord of sun and desire, of green and again green, of feathers I can't see floating like petitions borne by the breeze. My lord of here I am, where, where are you? My lord of thank you. My lord of my endless Lord.

(Originally appeared in *Portland Magazine*)

Two metal chairs and a table set up in the front yard so that Jacqui can spray paint them a snowy blue: a tableau from a Raymond Carver short story?

“100 Days.” What Jacqui has christened her latest workout regime: just do something physical every day. Nine days in and she’s perfect. Tag-along Lance is slogging along at 67%.

Indie’s latest trick: climb our Austrian black pine to the roof of our neighbor’s shed, then daintily her way down their nectarine tree, pad across the backyard, then meow at the back door till someone, usually Ashley, fusses over her.

After finals some students load up their cars and drive home for the summer, others begin internships, still others celebrate and take road trips across the bleak gorgeousness of America. Derek⁵ and friends go dumpster diving. So far he has netted a couch, a mostly useable laptop with lots of memory, a lamp, a couple pairs of shoes, and tons of unopened pasta and ramen. Also a juicer.

The Fred Ouchi⁶ watercolor is packed up and ready to send to my brother, Jon. After anchoring three houses—in Pocatello, Lakewood, and Sandy—it begins its journey to Seattle. No room for it in Mom’s new quarters at the rest home. My Aunt Mimi gave it to Dad as a thank-you gift in 1968, a few months after her husband (my mom’s brother) died in a terrible car accident during a trip to Montana. Where does the thank you come in? Aunt Mimi was living in Pocatello at the time. When she got the news, Uncle Don was in intensive care and fading fast. There were no flights to Bozeman, and she was in no condition to drive by herself, so my dad drove her. Uncle Don lasted just long enough for Mimi to squeeze his hand and for him to say his final goodbyes. What a drive that must have been. Seven hours there and seven hours back. What did Mimi and my dad talk about, especially now that she was a widow? Or rather what didn’t they talk about? Unfortunately, the painting became for me a kind of memento mori. I’d look at it and not see smudged hills or dusky greens but my uncle’s casket—where could you hide it in the painting? Plenty of room in the tumbledown barn or a certain stand of trees, perhaps even room in the ditch, right there close to the road.

5. Derek is one of Lance’s sons.

6. Fred Ouchi was a highly regarded Idaho watercolorist of the 1950s and ’60s.

What an unpredictable game soccer is. In Friday's contest, Tessa's team was down by one at the half but roared back to win 7-1, which doesn't count an eighth goal that was called back for an alleged offside.

The Brooke-and-Chase⁷ courtship continues to heat up. Chase hasn't proposed, but they're deciding whether to get married this summer, over Christmas break, or the summer of 2014. We keep looking for reasons to say no but can't find any.

I've been brainstorming a book-length memoir about growing up in Idaho. May as well jot down what I wanted way back when in junior high. Make the year 1975:

- *my own Datsun 240 Z
- *a color TV and a subscription to HBO, like my friend Donald Coons
- *a beard, or at least the beginnings of one
- *the chance to see Bigfoot
- *proof that the Bermuda Triangle was real
- *better Spanish—so I wouldn't have to cram for exams
- *plenty of moola
- *an unending supply of bottle rockets and a dad who would let me shoot them off
- *a guardian angel who knew me by name
- *Lori Butikofer, whom I had a crush on
- *an upside-down Curtis Jenny airmail stamp worth at least \$35,000
- *to be a starting guard for Franklin Junior High
- *the chance to break any commandment I wanted without feeling guilty
- *to levitate from my bed while meditating and float out my window

Mark Twain: "The man who is a pessimist before he's 48 knows too much; the man who is an optimist after he is 48 knows too little."

Jeff Holland: "[Twain] named his house cats, rather apocalyptically, Famine, Pestilence, Satan, and Sin."

Advice to myself: Re-read Bede's remarkable description of mortality, like a bird flying in through one monastery window and out through another, then use it in a talk. Before is eternity, and after is eternity, but the flight in the middle—that's mortal life.

7. Brooke is one of Lance's daughters.

Aperture

Poor pigeon—looking for further meadows
of blue, it took a wrong turn into cool
glass
and entered eternity, a miscalculation
that won't wash off. Rain has tried.
Each time I glance up from my desk,

a smudged breast under a slash
of wings keeping worlds separate.
The *out there* of frisbees and quick wristed
boys constellating a fall morning.
The *in here* of paper and filtered air

and a machine that croons I'm not in
even when I am. Some would call
this a window—fire plus melted sand
equals glass—a paradox, a brittle liquid
that holds still, sometimes for centuries.

A secret the Romans took with them
when they pulled out of Britannia,
leaving
the Saxons or Angles or whoever they were
to use strips of horn as windowpanes.

For centuries, then, they looked through
cow the way I look through pigeon,
 darkly, waiting to be transformed,
trickles
of light warming my face. I pick up the phone
 and my mouth pulls from my cranium
sentences uncomposed that compose me.

I take down a book: yesterday plus
 800 years. In this case, *Hymn of*
Caedmon,
in which a sparrow flies through an abbey—
 from one eternity to another through a
slice
of now. Lucky for that sparrow, the apertures

were unglassed. I look out again.
 In the courtyard a couple prepares to
part,
first by moving their mouths in words,
 then bringing their mouths together
to elegize *now* and thus make room

for future *now*. A kind of work we call pleasure.
 He closes his eyes to see more clearly.
Past windows open all over my body.
 She holds her finger in a Victorian
novel
to help her find her way by getting lost.

(Originally appeared in *Backyard Alchemy*)

What I found in my father's bottom bedroom drawer when I got to snooping around in grade school:

- *a swimsuit I'd never seen
- *a jar of Wheatie pennies and a few silver dollars
- *three arrowheads, one nearly perfect
- *a geologist's magnifying glass on an adjustable neck cord
- *a pick ax
- *several bandanas, most of them red.
- *five or six pocket knives
- *a tube of contraceptive foam, along with instructions, which were both sexy and impossible to understand
- *a stamp collection, including a duck stamp signed by my grandfather, Ershel Larsen

On top of that set of drawers a pair of matching photographs of my grandparents—my mother's parents. In black and white of course. McKay went by Mac and walked with a glittery cane and was very much alive. Helga went by Elgie and died a few months before my first birthday. Did they tell each other secrets over the great divide? And how did they hold hands? The living and the dead watching my every move.

Lance Larsen is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *What the Body Knows* (Tampa, 2017). His poetry and prose appear widely, in such venues as *Southern Review*, *Georgia Review*, *APR*, *Brevity*, *Poetry*, *New York Review of Books*, and *Best American Poetry 2009*. He has received a number of awards, including a Pushcart Prize and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. With his artist wife, Jacqui, he recently collaborated on *Three-Mile Radius*, an exhibition at the Springville Museum of Art celebrating making art where you are. He teaches writing and literature at BYU.

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