

**Walk**

COLE SWENSEN



# WALK

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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#36

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	v
GEORGE SAND: <i>PROMENADES ATOUR D'UN VILLAGE</i>	1
VIRGINIA WOOLF: "STREET HAUNTING"	15
LISA ROBERTSON: "SEVEN WALKS"	27
AUTHOR BIO	36

# INTRODUCTION

The work in this chapbook comes out of a consideration of the connection between writing and walking. Intuitively, they seem linked, two points on an indefinable but nonetheless distinct continuum. And by “intuitively” I mean, in this case, that the link is something lived rather than thought, something kinetic rather than analytic or reflective—which immediately suggests rhythm, a completely corporeal phenomenon which, in both cases, is based on internal counting, and counting of a peculiar sort, a counting in which nothing is counted, nothing accumulates, a counting in which every integer is 1.

The rhythm of writing is twofold: the metrical bounce of the syllables and their stresses, on the one hand, and on the other, the manual dance that the physical act requires, whether it’s the single hand making its distinctive loops and angles with a pen on paper, or the interlocking rhythms of two hands tapping around a keyboard. The rhythm of walking is also twofold: there’s the obvious one of the stride, attuned and responsive to mood, weather and terrain, and the perhaps less obvious one of thought, as walking transforms the normal flickering buzz, giving it a regular contour based on repetition and progression, amounting to a different kind of mental seriality, one that connects thought to Earth, to place. When sitting still, we occupy a place; when moving through it, we displace place, putting it into motion and creating a symbiotic kinetic event in which place moves through us as well.

Displacement is also a mode of occupation, one that writing and walking have in common, one that amounts to an instance of witness, with witness defined as the act of being present to something, whether it’s an event, a situation, a person, a view. To be *present to* is to present yourself, to offer yourself, to attend without judgment, opinion, intervention, appropriation or even evaluation, and yet to be present to is not to be passive; it is an act, the act of anchoring the witnessed in history, confirming it, acting as the “second” that fixes it, like a photograph is fixed by the final chemical bath, or like the photograph itself, which by taking a cross-section of the continuum of time, turns a fraction of that flow into a “thing.” It is the ear that turns the falling tree to sound.

Walking enacts a particularly enabling witness in that, unlike a standing witness, it fixes the event in a way that avoids stasis, a way that anchors something without stopping it.

Witnessing is what makes an occurrence indelible; the very fact of recording (without evaluation, intervention, appropriation or any other form of influence) takes account of the witnessed; it takes it into account, and thereby enters into the economy of accountability, and thereby takes a role in the establishment of truth. This accounting puts the non-cumulative counting inherent in the rhythm of both walking and writing to use.

To witness is to walk out of the self; it is to present the self as an opened space, a space that, in turn, invites occupation, occupation by the witnessed. And so the witness harbors; the witness holds. Walking can perform this kind of witnessing because all walking is also walking out of the self; the walking body always exists entirely at its furthest forward boundary, and continually overflows

it, creating room for the witnessed, but also creating a disjunction in which the self is out of alignment, is no longer congruent with itself, creating a fissure free of everything that pertains to individual personality, thus becoming a zone of unmarked receptivity.

This is what we're always walking toward, but writing can lead there too: the writing that is the walking of the hand, the walking of the mind, each always walking out of itself, a writing that is witness alone—which is writing as an intransitive verb, as walking is. It seems much harder to do in language than in motion, but perhaps walking can instill in us a rhythm that will carry us toward a writing that can witness in this way.

When walking, one is always walking toward the world (as effect) while simultaneously holding it to account (as cause). Walking is the motion that allows cause and effect to telescope into a singularity for which the walker is responsible—and to which the walker is thereby made able to respond.



**GEORGE SAND:**  
*PROMENADES AUTOUR  
D'UN VILLAGE*

## The First Walk

They set off along the river literally on white horses, G. Sand and two friends, listing shades of green, counting leaf by leaf, tree, sheen, and a translucent insect almost invisible at the tip of a blade of grass. One friend was an entomologist in search of certain cocoons, while the other, although an artist, was also looking for an insect, a common blue butterfly, but a perfect one. They walked on, late June, 1857.

The insect as pearl, the insect as chime, the insect as amethyst gilded in mica. This is what it's like to take a walk with an entomologist. A flight of crickets

suddenly ignited by a hand brushing across the top of the reeds and into the studded sky we breathe through the branches, we filtered through grasses

we occupy. Butterflies, he claims, though migratory, never cross a sea, never still a step beyond, yet said

that only something small could I believe. An antelope the size of an earring is nibbling a maze through the long grass down the long hill.

Sand had a particular affection for this particular village and chose it as a starting point for a series of radiating walks that wound along through gorges, past mills, along the river, a keen observer, she watches across the mirrored water four people in a boat in the very act of crossing, is an act of gliding slowly, barely parting. The mirror is green and almost touching. The oar drawing the boatman holding it a moment playing with the light on its edges breaking. Sand walked as a way of painting a landscape in and of the mind outside, landing farther, a stone tower overtaken by a flowering vine, a pencil tracing the entire route there and back, themselves overtaken by dusk and thus erring, errant, wandered all evening to find it suddenly late at night and the village asleep, picking their way down the steep stone street, a candle in each hand.

## The Second Walk

The village remains nameless and thus reigns in double silence, aphasiac in the deaf dark which dawn replaces with cacophonous birds followed no less loudly by children. "All good roads are insipid." So we chose a bad one heading for a ruin looming over the most beautiful view in all of France imagining in the background Gounod's *Bleeding Nun* with Weber's *Infernal Hunt* upon its crown around which, in a swirl of ought, it held a war of birds: owl, swallow, alarmed among swifts scattered and staggered within various raptors, featuring kite versus kestrel versus falcon who took to vicious fledgling, was the fallen having fallen, attracted by its voice.

While far below, the river slipping mercury through the sun  
undercuts the riverbank she called poetic, and one wonders what

viscous shade under certain trees she claimed was actually violet  
and all the rest a verdant, in an iridescent hum, rampant in design.

The reflections, too, across the rampant face, it's the sun that fades,  
shedding color, azure by the thousands and thus into a maybug

against a river that ages to a silver tarnish, sheep in the darkening  
distance growing darker in complex patterns, growing farther as another

kind of weather, as a point anchored in everything around that moves.

The river, once a torrent forced through narrow gorges, we now look out  
on a geological architecture that bears the traces of its various speeds

lightly sketched against the climbing horses painted quickly, she says a painter,  
from the corm within, occupies the shape it fills, and this is a form of knowledge.

Mr. Grandsire sketches the act of walking, mapping thought across a widening  
valley. It is our walking that makes it broader, that carries it a day farther

or an ancient manor—Henry IV once slept here—in exquisite ruins, the level  
of the water now so low and the surface so calm that the house sails off by itself.



The river is the Creuse, not far from Nohant, where she lived for most of her life. Sand is the epitome of the external walker; all her attention is riveted on whatever is before her. In short, she is an ecstatic walker, one who walks beside herself, and is therefore always followed by all she passes, a surrounded animal with looming trees in a wake that sweeps up much more than she thought—a soft path following itself with the sharp eyes of children. She was criticized at the time for romanticizing country life, a charge she addressed calmly and directly: you do not know them, and so actually though admittedly somewhat essentialist I don't, she said, find my prejudices any more or less accurate than your own.

The contemporary argument between realism and idealism in literature is echoed in Sand's depictions of the inhabitants of the region—in short, does realism exploit by accentuating the negative? In the background, natural history unfurls its indifference, and is it even possible to idealize a goat, a horse, a thorn, or does their inviolable haecceity render the distinction meaningless. Along with rivers, which can have no meaning, and every detail, the sound of footsteps on gravel, the battle perhaps more between the permanent and the ephemeral, each thing balanced on the edge of a precipice from which huge fields and tiny flowers somehow attain the same stature. It is to the eye, the work of all this presence. Insisting in detail that the beautiful is also real, often accidental, often in the middle of a phrase, a street, a day, in broad daylight, as they say.

Sand paid particular attention to faces, catching their passing, passing in answer, and tried to trace a history of features, you'd know them

anywhere, caught in a boy in the sun standing against a white-washed wall, his arms around a goat leaning against him. Or other animals,

also closely, also arranged the family, pulling for instance, a huge load of hay, all tightly bound in rolls, with the rain at its back.

Across the road another child alone, a road scored in, blond, the force of sun. There's an intense focus on children here, standing on a stair or standing in a

doorway, holding the unraveling edge, high above the town, a corner turns, and the landscape opens up, a curious purple composed of infinite darkneses

that somehow rise. The mystery of color, she says, not even the painters, or especially not the painters, in their studied blindness, a stranger to all language

with the scent of civilization. It is my job to be a stranger, and I repeat the words "vast" and "immense" in order to remain so.

And so a young woman stands in a doorway, and so a young woman  
standing on a stair. "That which is old is beautiful," and so we wait,  
calling everyone, even the beggars and the children, *Monsieur, Madame*.  
Would Madame like to climb her stair? Would Monsieur like to stand  
forever with his hand on the latch of a window half open and half shut.

## The Third Walk

A garden's ardor, sparse against the vast "we" on the edge of a ravine  
and so often, not a soul around, the wind emptying as it does, to live  
from the outside out; a soul is perhaps nothing more than a splendid  
view, one with horizon receding, pulling its thin line back getting thinner  
and thinner as it travels in no hurry.

There are two kinds of people in the world says Sand—those who dream of building a palace and those who dream of building a thatched hut who

dream the small in great detail in every leaf that overhangs in every shadow of every leaf the tiny writing that dreams alone. Comes undone and so they rode

back from the village to put her friend on the train to Paris, having only wanted, as she put it, to come to know one small corner of the real world.



**VIRGINIA WOOLF:**  
"STREET HAUNTING"

If shadows come in groves     Virginia Woolf preferred     London in the dark  
of an afternoon whose pale islands move from lamp to lamp, anonymous beneath  
and then a grove of sun     slanting to the last     as if in walking on     a tribe of them  
was made.     Virginia Woolf liked the silence of the hurrying forms     hurrying home  
dressed in cold.     As a city, all is surface     or a succession of surfaces that change  
texture and color, all its greys upon a grey     filtered in shadow     amber to a window  
climbing as does the gaze     that caught above the trees     a window's other lights  
and these     as if we, turning over or around     a slower hour     held the hour back

## Lamps

by which we are released.     As by the dark, we sign away  
a certain hold that held us toward     or left untried.     We  
catalogue the many kinds of light: one surrounds a warmth  
that turns into a face     as a face glides through its pool  
and other streetlights white     like those that cut across  
Green Park deepening the dusk.     In Woolf's day they  
would have been lit by a lamp-lighter who rode up on a  
bicycle with a ladder over his arm.     He leaned it against  
the lamppost, climbed up, turned a valve, and moved on  
to the next, and so on, until he suddenly turns off the path  
and cuts across the grass, bicycling away through the dark.

## Windows

also walk within a different break of light the warmth of it again  
pouring out across an amber almost rose sifting through the leaves

that screen a private world beyond the first floor window in which we watch  
a single finger rise and etch with a fingernail in which a diamond is set

a name on the other side of the glass. We tear ourselves  
away at once apart we turn from a great weight back

into the crowded street to the greater light of anonymity and cold.

## Other Windows

These are toys: they fit the palm they are the shops, and  
as such are full of distance composed of objects, which is

the definition of distance is this emerald and coral and a

new pair of boots all arranged at eye level Marco Polo  
in an eternity of pearl. And just to prove it, the next shop

is a watchmaker's thus tiny watches follow us or follow on

and unconcerned walking always counts under its breath  
you stand next to someone at a corner waiting for the traffic

to thin upon the number and the number upon him.

Woolf was an urban walker, seeking excuses to wander the streets  
among goldbeaters, accordion pleaters, the halt, and the blind,

believing in night and in winter, which shine. They bring things bright  
and hard, small, indestructible things that inexorably mix with a flagrant

fracture left unanswered, that nonetheless break on the human, all its body  
and eye. Virginia blinked in the sudden glare of the stark dark amid a general

fall, a house she'd only imagined surging up and sweeping everyone off  
into a rhythmmed reverie they could all walk into and further into.

In her own way, though in the footsteps of that quintessential urban walker,  
Baudelaire, she beats up the poor, drowning their pain in an acidic stare.

Which carries her miraculously back to the sparkingly beautiful: night as a series  
of illogical jewels assured by the darkness a piercing presence, which, though she

doesn't say it, is the difference between a country walk and a city walk, the latter  
offering no escape but a set of pearl earrings—if you put them on, everything

will change.

## More Pearl

And, indeed, it's while looking at these earrings in a shop window that everything suddenly changes, and she is mentally transported

to Mayfair, late evening, teetering between pearl and silver. The iridescent air underscoring the emptiness which is emptied by silence, which

is in turn emptied by the alabaster echoes of each step falling in a separate world someone opens a set of french windows

and, watching from the balcony, triangulates watcher, walker, and street, extending each in time and thus unseen a cat slips

along the top of a wall that the night draws and then erases.

The nocturnal and the urban have some essential connection which is made apparent coincidentally, even accidentally, through

walking, through that echo. It is of heels, and yet you never see and yet the trace is as engraved as if it were a streak, carved.

Virginia Woolf moved her characters through London with flowers on the top of buses, across waves, and through paintings and then

the flowing terraces of aging prime ministers, moved relentlessly onward by insistent instincts: the hunt. We must

remember that we set out to buy a pencil. And this is as true of the self as it is of any other sovereign object.



## More Pearl Again

She's still out to find her pencil, but other incursions, the consistent insistence, for instance, of a mental visit to Princess Mary's garden

decked in a string of pearls. It is June. And as she turns to go a fragrance holds and stops you in your step; it all comes rushing back

even though once back on the street, the scent becomes itself the past that asks and thus from which you run.

## More Lamps

Because Nature turned at the sound, Woolf claims, we're twofold and one has always been a wanderer. There's a separate soul lodged

in the leg. She turned left down a smaller street that then became what we actually are. She turned left again and found a man in a doorway

half hidden in shadow against the other half, from which the face is cast. She turned again and passed another dozen faces lighting back into a street.

## Cast in Rapt Passage

You in passing catch a passing word or phrase, vast in the quick that ignites, and you suddenly see the entire life, how it might have right here, or here the life collapsed: 75 years into a snapshot of a woman turning too quickly and, catching hold of a stranger's arm, opens her mouth to say we're late for the train.



**LISA ROBERTSON:**  
"SEVEN WALKS"

## The First Walk

We are guided. We are we. Foxed and shaded, sliding over the surface of civilization which is reading behind us or reading inside us is a

civil contract shattering in its choices. There is the Styrofoam cup and the paradise that is likely not quite ready for us, crushed. The petal in

the hand that disappeared within

The petal was another one; it undid, and then one again, one pale room over the market turning pink. It is early in the rhythm of the theater of

the soon. We walked the vowel into an archive through windows rent apparent by bombing, entirely morning—light can seem to strike light in

a spear that breaks, but we are used to the broken, and so built a library.

## The Second Walk

And thanking memory, we spent every afternoon in a park, hiding a different century my guide with the endless peaches, and then

suddenly a fig. Suddenly threw our class affiliations into striking relief, and disappearing to everyone but ourselves, we let time slide

through us. Yet cannot deny: we felt hands too dragging through our own, leaving empty. We were not alone. There were the many

rooms, and through them moved another hundred years, my guide continually suggesting that: "Any rain makes yet another, smaller

room for us" and "This, too, will refuse to vanish at the least" and asks of what are we the medium and can we haul behind us this

minor fountain, this gallery after gallery of reflective glass in which falling water takes part, taking apart the faces, for instance, ours

pressed against the panes of a greenhouse trying to put a name to the living there.

## The Third Walk

If a room could be vast, there we'd be, the aforementioned street  
and here we are thinking rain is bound to cost. My guide led me

in all clarity among a revolving panorama of delicacies almost  
spherical in its thoroughness, it was thoroughly everything one ever

who never thought of gilding gold leaf placing it under the tongue  
with a grain of porcelain plagiarized to window-sized. A body suddenly

and from then on sociologically, flings open the door and flees out into  
the glistening street. It was I am the body, and it was I then the door

and thus we passed our evenings, my guide and I, an experiment in  
hunger irradiating the trees—someone must believe—what was, we

saw, after seeing it written out, memory as ornament, lavishly unfree.

## The Fourth Walk

Among the ruined are the ruins. Rules even skies can wreck in shreds,  
a rest of something caught in forms. A rent, we walked along an edge

of the city and thus of a continent (having found ourselves once again  
in Vancouver) and of a sea. Intent on what we want. We wanted. We

thought a lot about the thought almost. An accident that aims. A sunlight  
ends against a curve of glass. It didn't match. We walked again; we left

the sunlight cut from hands. We've become gothic without even thinking  
how contested be the scape, now erased, and now the fear, the ambient

ambivalent of "can we please not be all effaced." Without even thinking we  
forgot the broken factory, the broken orchard, and the broken ocean in

precisely that order, I, who wasn't counting, thought only of the tower,  
cut out against the sky and of the itinerant and their tremendous patience

in the face of us.

## The Fifth Walk

In which we buy an object and wrap it up in scarlet, what was said of it,  
one's grip, my guide who held. The streets dim-lit down a stutter in  
the step. Once close, we passed it back and forth. Some things call  
back which set us off at a loping gait. We recognized the formation  
as a street and then a grove. The dignity of. Is all in poise. Raptors  
quincunxed overhead, never lone among, and so we named them Cloth  
of Gold, Summer Belle-Fleur, Winter Blush, and Pommier d'Antoinette,  
le droit de l'oubli translucent beneath a lamppost, its glimmer anonymous  
in the sun. We found many of them—threshold, mast, and sail—of  
this my guide is capable and lingers thus shrinking into happiness.

## The Sixth Walk

took place entirely on a bridge. It brought within it things in which  
I was alone. So there I was, looking down on the tops of trees looking  
down on wind. In fact, a form of window I couldn't bear to cross. All  
night is a way of walking of rocking with the dark. A closer look  
brought the headlights out—a cortege winding its way through the park  
far below. My guide on its own, and I, hounded, bear the sway. I liken  
it to waking amid the detritus of an enormous feast, they feasted  
into morning, and, indeed, at dawn the animals began their crossings  
careful not to disturb my silence, and occasionally, a child. I am used to it  
now and now I think of it as a painting of a woman opening her mail.

## The Seventh Walk

What is a gift? Several unfurling speech, each suggesting. Suddenly it is we who are the many and collecting, arranging images in the strange

interior, inside of which we were strangers oddly resembling our pictures. In the wake of reflective surfaces, we considered Atget, his life in gesture.

We translated the gestures and there found an intimate city. Our. Founded city in a slippage slipping among its documents—this was our intention,

and carefully. Some one leaned down to touch the street with the tip of a finger recording the operative colors: sea grey, cypress shadow, charcoal

green blending forward, almost breathless, in fact, we walked so long that the park came back—mint violet, my widow; smoke hazel, my queen.

“We are we and in ourselves these documents and seek” curling up on a park bench in the walking dark and walking on in certain words.



## AUTHOR BIO



**Cole Swensen** is the author of 14 volumes of poetry and a collection of critical essays. Her books have twice been finalists for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award and once for the National Book Award, and she has won the Iowa Poetry Prize, the San Francisco State Poetry Center Book Award and the National Poetry Series. A 2006 Guggenheim Fellow, she was the co-editor of the Norton anthology *American Hybrid* and the guest editor of *BAX: Best American Experimental Writing 2014*. Also a translator, she has won the PEN USA Award in Literary Translation, and she is the founding editor of La Presse, a press specializing in French poetry in translation. She has taught at the University of Denver and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and currently teaches at Brown University.



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