

Fall 1990

Walls to Put Up, Walls to Take Down

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Recommended Citation

Dobyns, Stephen (1990) "Walls to Put Up, Walls to Take Down," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 34 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss34/3>

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Walls to Put up, Walls to Take Down

The old mad house in Santiago stood tucked back behind the hospital on a side street to the cemetery, walls of cheap brick, cheap concrete through which the inmates had bored little holes, and walking past

one could see dozens of cleft sticks with notes offered to the passers-by, some begging for money, others for help or food, some asking that word be sent to some friend or relative or lover who surely

must be waiting just as they themselves had waited, all day holding their sticks as if fishing over a dry pond, the water seeped away, leaving several tires, a cat skeleton tied to a brick, a rusted

car door. I remembered all this in a hotel bar in Belgrade when a whore was telling me, "My name is Dragonova but I prefer to be called Lolita." Lolita the promise, Dragonova the reality,

a beautiful girl hoping to become a hairdresser, but no matter how much I wanted her flesh, to cup her breasts, nuzzle my nose in her belly, it was her flesh that stood between us and what I wanted,

stood between us like the wall of the madhouse. "A little pop," a friend said, "you should have taken her upstairs for a little pop." But what could we really do? She might charitably moan.

I might have my little flash of light, a meal after which one still feels hungry. The thing is that nobody ever went down that street in Santiago. It was a side street. But it didn't matter, it was

the only street they had. Sometimes with my wife, if we haven't been quarreling, it feels like we are sitting together without skin, a large basket of confused body parts. "In this mood," as Wordsworth

remarked, "successful composition generally begins." It's as if I could reach her skin from the inside, burrowing outward instead of poking at the surface like a dowsers looking for water. Flaubert in Egypt

had a wonderful whore, Kuchuk Hanem, who he swore would remember him more than all the others. "Toward the end," he wrote, "there was something sad and loving about the way we touched."

Later he realized his self-deception. "This particular tourist who was vouchsafed the honors of her couch has vanished from her memory like all the others." Also, "As for physical pleasure,

it must be slight, since the famous button, the seat of such pleasure, is snipped off at an early age." And he concludes, "Traveling makes one modest--you see what a tiny spot you inhabit in the world."

And as a postscript: "I must tell you, my dear sir, that I picked up in Beirut (I discovered them in Rhodes, land of the dragon) seven chancres. . . Each night and morning I bandage my poor prick." Recently,

in Santiago I went searching for this madhouse and it was gone, torn down, and only a section of wall remained through which the inmates had pushed their sticks. A hot and smoggy day,

the streets crowded with buses, cabs. Think of all those people in transit--all those of destinations with one single destination waiting a little further beyond. The mental patients, more like prisoners,

had been transferred. Or perhaps with modern medicine they had been released and had no need to ask for anything, plead or beg for anything, as they proceeded in speedy transition from one less

than perfect place to the next. Do you remember how Ford Madox Ford wrote that you marry a person to finish a conversation with her? And I also like how that summons up that somewhat outdated

legal expression for illicit fucking: criminal conversation, or crim con as they said in the courts. Many times my wife and I speak only to complain and I am the bag of stones she wears around her neck,

but other times, fewer times, we are engaged in that long conversation, the one we stay together for, the one we always hope for, where the flesh seems to disappear and the parts get all jumbled together

as in a cannibal's stew, even if she sits in one chair and I sit in another. The whore in Belgrade knew about one hundred words in English and half were the specialty words of her profession. I bought her

a Coke. She asked why I was in Belgrade. In explanation I showed her the book of my poems translated into her language. She read a few, decided she wanted it, asked for it, asked me to sign it, then carried it

off to her next customer, beautiful skimpily dressed girl with a face of shadow and a book of poems. Oh, Dragonova/Lolita sleep with it under your pillow just once. Those inmates in Santiago could see nothing,

hear nothing. All they had were those holes and their messages--help me, they put me here by mistake--and years of waiting until the whole place was torn down. And I asked my wife who knew the city,

Didn't you ever read the messages? And she said, No one ever stopped. Some friends had told her what the bits of paper said. At the end of the street stood the huge granite gates of the cemetery, like

the gates of a municipal museum but bigger, a city of corpses with its ghettos and rich neighborhoods, rows of fancy houses although no one asks to borrow a cup of sugar. The trouble with Belgrade, the promise

of Lolita and the actuality of Dragonova, her mad house walls and my mad house walls rubbing crazily together, what if I grew to like it? It makes me remember an old Texan in Amsterdam in 1959--

for us teenagers the lovely Dutch whores charged two dollars and seventy cents if any of us managed to dredge up the nerve, for this Texan they charged twenty-seven dollars and a lot of laughter. Still

he would stagger out each evening, his guts hurt, kidneys hurt, his prick was wobbly and battered as he kept banging himself against the hard Dutch flesh. Sometimes around midnight I would find him in a bar

too depressed even to speak. He had children somewhere, a divorced wife. What beauty gives us is the hope of intimacy. Fashion and advertising, the whole package, all promise a certain closeness,

an occasion when the walls might disappear, one inmate rubbing his belly against another belly of his choosing, or which has chosen him, the long conversation, the erasure of isolation,

as if we might all be piled together like puppies in a pet shop window, a tangle of extremities and no barriers anyplace, hardly any need to speak, each thought anticipated and responded to,

no concern for the future, no regret for the past, just this complete touching, this discourse with all the barriers gone, and that's the joke, right? Who put the walls up in the first place,

who made them indestructible and now we want them gone? I told my wife, can you take me to that street? So we drove through Santiago. Smog so dense our eyes burned, but all we found were just fragments

of brick walls with little holes bored through them, thick walls, nearly two feet of boring and digging, then the waiting, occasionally jiggling the stick to show someone was there, and we knew without speaking

they hadn't been released, weren't out on the street, but that somewhere were new walls of red brick or concrete, and on one side someone was trying to scratch his way through with a pin to make a hole

big enough for a little note, a little request,
and on the other side the traffic, the honking,
air so thick with fumes it wipes out the mountains,
leaving just the city, its constant jittery motion.

Stephen Dobyns