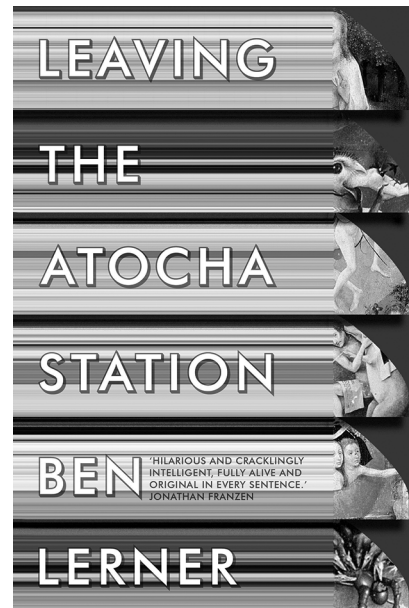


Tekst 8

The following text is an adapted part of the first chapter of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, by Ben Lerner.

- 1 A turning point in my project: I arrived one morning at the Van der Weyden to find someone had taken my place. He was standing exactly where I normally stood and for a moment I was startled, as if beholding myself beholding the painting, although he was thinner and darker than I. I waited for him to move on, but he didn't. I wondered if he had observed me in front of the *Descent from the Cross* and if he was now standing before it in the hope of seeing whatever it was I must have seen. I was irritated and tried to find another canvas for my morning ritual, but was too accustomed to the painting's dimensions and blues to accept a substitute. I was about to abandon room 58 when the man broke suddenly into tears, convulsively catching his breath. Was he, I wondered, just facing the wall to hide his face as he dealt with whatever grief he'd brought into the museum? Or was he having a *profound experience of art*?
- 2 I had long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art and I had trouble believing that anyone had, at least anyone I knew. I was intensely suspicious of people who claimed a poem or painting or piece of music "changed their life," especially since I had often known these people before and after their experience and could register no change. Although I claimed to be a poet, although my supposed talent as a writer had earned me my fellowship in Spain, I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility. Insofar as I was interested in the arts, I was interested in the disconnect between my experience of actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf; the closest I'd come to having a profound experience of art was probably the experience of this distance, a profound experience of the absence of profundity.
- 3 Once the man calmed down, which took at least two minutes, he wiped his face and blew his nose with a handkerchief he then returned to his pocket. On entering room 57, which was empty except for a lanky and sleepy guard, the man walked immediately up to the small votive image of Christ attributed to San Leocadio: green tunic, red robes, expression of deep sorrow. I pretended to take in other paintings while looking sidelong



at the man as he considered the little canvas. For a long minute he was quiet and then he again released a sob. This startled the guard into alertness and our eyes met, mine saying that this had happened in the other gallery, the guard's communicating his struggle to determine whether the man was crazy — perhaps the kind of man who would damage a painting, spit on it or tear it from the wall or scratch it with a key — or if the man was having a profound experience of art. Out came the handkerchief and the man walked calmly into 56, stood before *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, considered it calmly, then totally lost it. Now there were three guards in the room — the lanky guard from 57, the short woman who always guarded 56, and an older guard with improbably long silver hair who must have heard the most recent outburst from the hall. The one or two other museum-goers in 56 were deep in their audio tours and oblivious to the scene unfolding before the Bosch.