

*Amy Tillman*  
**Dumpster Diver**

I WAS CUTTING A SUGARED CRÊPE into big bites that were small enough to eat when a non-locally sourced family of four sat down over their own thin pancakes in a local shop. And since they looked the sort, I told a couple of proud parents that one kid friendly adventure needed to top their list: I recommended the cheap rent-a-car I had rented, and the shorter road trip I had taken to the perfume capital of the world, where the family could attend the same corresponding fragrance making workshop I myself had attended come morning. I made my own perfume, and I figured the little girl and her mother could do the same for themselves, but that the little brother sawing away with a small plastic knife might instead make a perfume for his grandmother.

To perfume, he exclaimed, "Ooh yeah! I'm going to make mine with dog hair!"

Then, in keeping with the cerebral connection, he declared so loud that even the waiter could hear him, "My Grandma loves dogs!"

This kid had me smiling out loud as I ignored a fresh faced French friend named Seb who was smiling, too, mostly because he was a dog walker who related. In contrast to my late forties, his age was not old enough to count, and despite subsisting on not much of a salary, he had paid for both my soda and my chocolate crêpe and this alone deserved attention.

Still, slightly homesick, I kept talking to four US citizens, not one Frenchman, because it was a relief to speak English for the first time since arriving in France. So, I kept it up in my native tongue, not making liaisons, until those two rascally kids finished up what remained of their snack. Then, as soon as the friendly family walked away, I switched back over to Seb and French as usual, hoping those Brooklynites really would go to Grasse.

But since I was rude for turning my head on him, I decided to re-engage Seb in my second language. We were soon chatting about labradors when talk turned to food waste.

Weeks earlier, another French friend had turned me onto a service that did what its name described. Too Good to Go allowed registered users to rescue food items that were destined for the trash bin. At the end of every day, unsold items were packed into oversized grocery bags and made available for pick up at specific hours for a fee always paid for up front, often only two or three euros per secret paper sack.

Seb was busy telling me that with his limited income, he used this service too, but he surprised me when he went on to say that he often showed up outside a small grocery store with one of his dogs. Most evenings, he picked up doomed fruits and vegetables, also destined for the trash. The best part, he told me, was that these were all handed over for free. A bargain at half the price, I asked Seb if I could meet him to profit from the evening's bounty on Monday night at 19:30.

Always on time, when I got to the given address, Seb was already there

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

with a hound on a leash. He was chatting with a guy he must have known intimately because they both were smiling the same smile.

The two obviously shared hip in common.

Astride a silver bicycle at rest, Seb's friend had a second bike propped up sideways against his left leg. I was curious as to why he would need two bikes, when he could only ride one, so I asked him to explain the logistics behind his four wheels. He told me the other bike belonged to his girl before he pointed at her. Rail thin with a shocking head of curly red hair, she was opening a large, black garbage bag discarded in front of the market alongside several more of its type. Apparently, in France, the factually cool all do what she was doing, and they always get their hands dirty.

As I watched the girlfriend begin to dig through the first bag like a dog with smelly red hair, I thought the whole experience bizarre, so I told Seb that sifting through Friday's expired goods seemed weird to me as an outsider.

In return, he asked me, "People don't dumpster dive in the USA?"

While I affirmed that I had heard of people doing so for furniture, I also said that I had never heard of people doing it for food, and then I explained that I was shy to join in, even if it was ecological. It was summertime, when most food went bad quickly, and I was afraid of food from the week before. Still, despite my initial hesitation, I wanted to be edgy and funky too, so I opened a bag.

And as I sifted through, I thought about that nine year old making his grandma a perfume in the world's perfume capital, where all smelled fresh, unlike the foul odor emanating from my sack of decaying fruits and vegetables.

And while I didn't tell Seb that I was fascinated at how his boyish youth stood in sharp contrast to food that was rotting, I also did not tell him I was disgusted by the mold on an orange. I was convinced I would find nothing safe to eat, so I was floored when I actually found a few salvageables that hadn't capitulated to the heat.

I had brought a small bag with me for what had seemed like real reasons, and I loaded it up with those reasons before carrying home my spoils that fortunately hadn't yet spoiled. I went home to a home that was not really my home, it was just where I parked my bones for a summer abroad, until I was unfairly fined for damage I had caused and not caused all at the same time.

Not quite two months ago, I had arrived at my little apartment in Southern France, where all was in working order save for an automatic trash can with a lid that refused to lift and a sofa with a small rip on its faux leather seat that refused to go away. Existing damage, I failed to document either because I erroneously figured the host already knew the general condition of the apartment since it belonged to her.

But with ancient furniture there is always a risk of the usual wear and tear, and after sitting on that sofa in the same spot for eight weeks straight, I wore and tore like a champion. The small rip went from being negligible to pronounced, and when I checked out at the end of my stay, all of a sud-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

den I was being held liable for the damage.

Initially, I was ordered to buy a new couch I couldn't afford. If I refused, I was told I would have to face the consequences. I didn't know what the words "or else" actually meant, but I did know that I didn't want them to happen to me, so I found a sofa I could afford and I offered to buy it. But even when I promised to have this new couch delivered to the apartment, all I heard was crickets, so I offered to pony up some cash. That effort was also rejected. Instead, at the tail end of my visit, the proprietress filed a damage claim against me that I was made to pay.

In her claim, she described a clean cut made with a knife rather than a rip made with a rear end. She didn't once mention that the sofa was ripped already. Rather, she said that the convertible couch was practically brand new, although anyone with eyes in their head could see on first glance that it was aged. Worse, her price tag doubled. And while she had dismissed my report when first alerted to the condition of the broken trash can, now she wanted me to buy her a new one of those, too. Worse, she went on to complain that I had left her apartment so filthy that she had to clean like a slave for over six hours to take care of the mess. But when she carped that I had left crumbs in the oven, I wondered what she would have said about the maggots I found in that trash can on an ill-fated day when I figured out that in summer weather with no AC it's always best to take the garbage out daily.

Still, I smirked at her protestations as well as at her hefty fine. I should hope she had cleaned for six hours, especially in between guests, if only because of a deadly virus that was still circulating. Besides, I wasn't exactly her maid, even though I had tried to tidy up after scrubbing the toilet.

My trip had come to its unfortunate close, and I didn't want any rain to fall on my sunny summer, so I tried to make myself feel better by dividing the damage deposit out by the number of days I spent overseas. It came to just under \$9.00 a day, a price I for once could afford. Insignificant, the money hardly mattered because I had just lived in France for an entire summer, where I came to know a hipster like Seb, who walked a bunch of dogs for a living, and bought me crêpes, and who would dive in a dumpster for rotten tomatoes even after I went home for real and never heard a word from him again.