

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

*Catherine Batac Walder*

### **Paris, a party, now and always**

**OF OUR THREE DAYS IN PARIS** in December, 2006, all were wet and cold. Summer beckons and I decide to give Paris a second chance.

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I see the full moon as we come out of the Eurotunnel and drive from Calais to Paris. Bugs crash into and die on our windscreen.

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The hotel room on the eighth floor is for free, from points earned through your membership that requires spending on other things. The Eiffel Tower is in view from the balcony. I am, once again, awed and left to wonder how the other people who lived in this city and had to leave, could let go of such beauty... Its lights are dancing, not at all the "lighthouse" effect I expect. Because it is one o'clock in the morning. A few seconds of dancing lights and right before our very eyes, the Eiffel Tower switches off.

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From across Notre Dame, we find Shakespeare and Company. I fall in love with it in a heartbeat, my vision of a hidden bookshop around the corner, all treasure that is there for the taking. The numerous times I find a book to purchase and not grudgingly put it down to change my mind (oh what self control!) is worthy of accolade. But where did she go, that young college student who used to visit all the book sales every other day? Tuesdays they were. On Tuesdays there were new boxes shipped to the shops. I would go from box to box and felt a sense of panic every time another buyer began rummaging through a box I hadn't yet gone through.

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During lunch, the waiter does not understand when you ask for salt. You have a weakness for Argentinian or French steak. I don't. Early experience of eating steak gave me nightmares of being asked about food in general, "medium, rare or well done?" The steak you have is tender, the problem is the knife. Five years of French at an English school doesn't help. You are too polite, or maybe shy, to ask for another knife. I suggest for you to carry a Swiss knife everywhere. For restaurants that have no sharp knives.

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You drink a lot of Orangina. You say it's only in France that you drink a lot of it. I try one, two bottles. I am afraid of the acid. The Rennie indigestion tablets might come in handy.

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We avoid the steps leading to the Basilique Sacré-Coeur, and instead make our way through the streets from the back. This is probably the only place in France that's not flat. Save for the Alps. We amble, doing our best to avoid dog poo. Those poor animals must have diarrhea. I think it is even worse than walking up Egham Hill on my way to work at the univer-

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sity trying to avoid sick on the pavement courtesy of drunken students. The sick never gets cleaned and just dries up.

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We round a corner at the foot of the Basilica, cross a few pedestrian lanes and end up in an area with all men asking, "Marlboro? Philip Morris?"

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Munch's painting of The Thinker we see at the Rodin Museum becomes my instant favourite. And also the sculpture of the "Jeune fille au chapeau fleuri" (Young girl with roses on her hat). You say the empty eye sockets are creepy.

Earlier we had to deposit our bags as we entered the museum. I find a place to sit to get my purse. You give your bag to the woman at the counter. As I approach I see her give you a number for claiming. I ask her in English if it's possible for the two bags to be together. She answers me in French, motioning I can carry my bag inside. It is a simple statement but the emotion on her face, complete with the shaking of a finger, makes it feel like she is telling me off.

I feel as though the French give you that feeling if you can't speak their language, you should be embarrassed. They're proud of speaking it. Which is the correct attitude if you're in your own territory. The Finns and Norwegians are exactly the opposite. Especially the Finns. They look apologetic, almost ashamed, if you can't understand them. I guess it's their own way of accepting their language is really difficult to learn.

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I comment on the baskets on the bicycles. I tell you of my Uncle Romy's old bicycle and that it also had a basket. He made a seat for me on that bike when I was about four years old. He sanded the seat, painted it and screwed it onto the front of his seat so I could ride the bicycle with him during early mornings. You are quick to comment, even before I say it myself, "that's why you never learned how to bike ride." Uncle Romy loved and took care of that bicycle. It was passed on to another uncle when he left to work in Saudi Arabia. That bike had a good life even after several relatives almost fought over who should keep it.

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The trains at the Metro stop so suddenly, not giving anyone the time to steady himself, the doors opening as soon as the train halts.

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At the Louvre, only the titles of the art are translated, into English. We turn away from the crowd screaming popular art. We mull over the pleasant visit to Saatchi Gallery back home in England. You say, "Saatchi is an acquired taste. The Louvre is pop art. At the Louvre, most people come only to see the same painting or the same sculpture, have a snapshot with it, and keep for the friends back home to know they have been to somewhere exotic." The place is crowded. It is school holidays, the woman holding a child is pushing your backpack, hoping to get closer to

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the Mona Lisa. You feel the push is deliberate, one hand around her child and another hand on your bag. She keeps complaining how people are pushing her. You take my hand and hope maybe, just maybe, we will find a place in this crowded city where everybody won't go. A place for people like us, two ordinary people who love to do things as spending some afternoons reading quietly in the kitchen while having tea. Not for us, this giant party of a place, this social gathering of sorts. It must be quiet at the graveyard.

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Only in one day, we pass three pairs of brides and grooms doing a photo-shoot. They are Asian, possibly Korean, and possibly emulating the hit TV series Lovers in Paris. To be married in Paris, that's probably their way of saying "exotic."

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I tell you I used to make tapes at graveyards. "Mixed tapes?" You ask. I say it was more of voice recordings to friends or to anyone I would like to record my voice for. I look into space, mixed tapes seem so far away. I talk about the times when I also wrote stories and read in graveyards. No one popular was buried in those graveyards I frequented. Other than the time when families visited to light candles for their dead on All Saint's Day, the graveyards were mine.

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We go to Père-Lachaise. It is packed and looking for a grave is made slightly easier by just looking at where the crowd gathers. A guard is watching Jim Morrison's grave. A fence encloses the grave.

Chopin's grave is busy. Oscar Wilde is fine but I'm not that huge of a fan to leave a kiss mark on his tomb.

Sarah Bernhardt is almost lonely, as opposed to Edith Piaf who probably acquired more admirers because of the recent film. Your camera has a sounding click that attracts attention. A woman says something in Italian, meaning to voice her annoyance at people taking photos. She demands for the others to be silent. She screams in the process.

I also want to scream "I hate popular graves!" We visited James Joyce's grave twice in Zurich and every time, there was no single soul in the graveyard. Or maybe there were unseen ones.

Some people at Père-Lachaise do not even want to be there. I know it. Some are just sitting in the square, the look of people persuaded against their will to be there.

I am glad Marcel Proust is also lonely and so we can visit in silence for a minute without rubbing elbows with anyone. And so is Auguste Comte, whose grave we cannot find at first. It is hot, I am grumpy, the map is useless, we are tired. Quite a pessimistic walk we have to get to the founding father of Positivism. We argue a little, all positive attitudes hanging by a thread. I can be very critical of you sometimes – always not a good thing. I feel as though every time you do something I don't like, I hold on to it like ammunition, keeping it in my arsenal so by the next argument, I can bring it up. I am sorry. I hate doing it but I still do anyway. Maybe I should keep

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in mind what you said to me once, barring all sense of humor, "You're always right. Except when I am. If we agree on things then we can be both right."

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The trip is only for two days but it feels long because you make a point to do everything on my list of things to see and do. You are my guide and map person. It is not surprising. You who once drove across two countries for two days just to pick me up from university for Christmas holidays. Back to England, I close my eyes dreaming of the comforts of our kitchen, the extractor drowning our voices as we engage in one of those banter. We brave the traffic on the M25 and I tell you the next trip will be yours.