

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Michael Ryan
The Must-See

A bird flew through the window of our rented Paris flat, crashed into a mirror above my bed and fell on my head, waking me from my nap. I jumped up, ready to fight. The intruder lay on my thin pillow, still breathing.

I called for Alvaro, forgetting he wasn't there until the alarm suddenly blared. I pushed the clock's buttons, moved its levers, turned it over. The sound was loud enough to wake the neighbors. I hadn't set the damned thing, so why was it going off? Alvaro wouldn't have done it for me. As soon as we had dropped off our bags, he left to explore the city.

As I wrestled with clock-time the bird attempted to extend life-time—stretching its legs, occasionally flapping its wing, opening and closing its song-less beak. I yanked the plug out of the wall, watched the red numbers fade slowly to black, then dropped the machine in the middle of the bed.

I found a mug in the kitchenette, washed it, filled it with tap water after consulting my guidebook about the potability of Paris water. I placed the mug on the nightstand where the clock used to be.

Touching a bird could give you a disease, even breathing their fumes, Mom told me as a child. I didn't need that. This was already not the tenth-anniversary trip I had been looking forward to. I held my breath, lifted the edges of the pillow with my forefingers and thumbs. The bird wasn't more than five inches long, brown feathers wrinkled, one eye winking at me. In the Florida Everglades, Alvaro and I peered through binoculars, struck by the majesty of their enormous birds. Far-away birds.

Holding my breath too long was impossible (especially since I started smoking), so I exhaled through my mouth and inhaled through my filtering nose.

I noticed its legs. Birds knees bend backwards. I never thought about that before. My right arthritic knee was a point of pain as I walked towards the patio, holding the pillow away from my body, a bird-bearer. Bending one leg and extending it, the bird attempted to kick-start itself. Failing, it tried the other. Two clawed wrinkly feet with sharp nails were like spider legs, cringing and crawling.

On our narrow ground-level patio, I looked through the latticed fence to the courtyard. There was only a round table with two chairs, a few unkempt bushes, and a dry fountain. Above me, some windows were closed and others open, but the silence made me think Parisians were outside on this beautiful summer day.

I checked one more time for nosy neighbors, then dumped the bird over the fence, along with the pillow.

Standing on the patio a few hours later, I told Alvaro the whole story. "A bird? Under that pillow?" Using the map of the city, he pointed.

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“Really?”

“No.” I crouched down. “That’s where I napped.”

With one thumb hooked around his old backpack, he put his pinky through the fence, touched the pillow.

“I think he’s dead,” I said, assigning it the male gender. I checked Alvaro’s face for signs of what he felt. He didn’t like to talk about “feelings,” yet he chatted with everyone on the way here—travelers boarding the plane, flight attendants, the non-English speaking cab-driver even though the extent of our vocabulary was *voulez vous coucher avec moi* and *parlez vous francais*? I was the sensitive one, he said, as the counselor. Now, his brown eyes were sufficiently wrinkled at the corners, thin eyebrows raised above what was normal, lips flat-lined and sealed together, neck taut except for a middle-aged wattle of chestnut-colored skin hanging down. His close-cropped hair was almost half-gray.

His mouth opened and he laughed, a string of saliva connecting his lower and upper lip. “It fell on your head?”

“And I couldn’t shut off the alarm.” We stood, my creaky right knee causing me to favor my left.

He grabbed my shoulder. “You were afraid you’d disturb the bird?”

“I told you.” I pointed to the clock on the bed. “I couldn’t shut it off so I unplugged it.”

Alvaro leaned against a wrought-iron chair, holding his stomach. When he laughed that hard, tears pooled in his eyes but didn’t fall. Why was I stressing out about this?

I sat across from him. “Tell me you don’t have an aviary on your list of must-sees.”

He held my hand. “Maybe, with your help, we can make one here.”

I put my hand up to my neck, feigning shock. His sarcasm was comforting. “Let’s get out of here before something else happens.”

A few more things happened between our tours of the Louvre, Musée d’Orsay, and Sacre Coeur—the tickets we bought for the “Versailles Light Show” were at 2:00 but we didn’t show up until 3; I was caught in a thunderstorm, lost my phone, and had to retrieve it from an old man who texted Alvaro in broken English; I snuck a small pistachio mousse pie into my pocket for the Bruce Springsteen concert and it leaked onto my wallet and passport; Alvaro was exhausted at night for sex, the lube on his nightstand sitting there like a monument of a broken clock; we argued because I was tired after five days of non-stop sightseeing so he had to spend an afternoon alone.

While Alvaro explored the Latin Quarter, I caught up on U.S. news—civil wars in Egypt and Syria, more bombings in Afghanistan and Iraq. As editor of a journal that gives voice to third-world conflicts and poverty, this trip was Alvaro’s much-needed break from the news. I wrote in my

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neglected travel journal and napped with the window closed. A few days ago, someone removed our welcome pigeon, as we now called it.

I missed home—our king-sized bed, central air, nieces and nephews, home-cooked meals except for Tuesdays when Alvaro played on a gay softball team that I quit because of my knee. We had seven days left for Alvaro to check things off his list. A list that I agreed to, but I never imagined he wouldn't stray from it. Exploration, to him, was soaking up a culture's collective wisdom. I wanted a romantic dinner and a drink.

That evening, he sat next to me on the futon, the portable air-conditioner as loud as a small engine. "How are you?" he asked.

We didn't argue often, but when we did there wasn't a pattern to our reconciliation. Arguing rarely included yelling, but often included some period of separation. Sometimes, he would return and wrap me in his muscular arms, or wait in silence until I spoke.

"Better." I balanced my laptop on the pamphlets, flyers and receipts spread across the coffee table. "We've seen so much. I needed time to process everything."

His smile carved parentheses around his mouth. "Whenever you're ready, I have a surprise for you."

"For me?" I turned towards him, tucking one leg under the other. Sensory overload is cured by a surprise, as though everything we had seen wasn't surprise enough. "What is it?"

"A surprise," he kissed my lips, "is better shown than told."

I didn't have to dress-up, he said, but I showered anyway, sprayed my hair to make the front flip up, and splashed cologne on my neck. When I was ready, he put the computer aside without a second reminder.

We darted through the crowded Paris streets—past sidewalk cafes and gift shops, bikers with fresh baguettes poking out of their baskets that I could practically smell, the patisserie where we bought quick paninis for lunch. We stopped, as always, to gawk at the flying buttresses, gargoyles, and stained-glass of Notre Dame.

"It's so intricate." I hooked my arm around his elbow. "There's always something new to see." Lights, not strong enough to pierce the gloaming, left the cathedral in a dusky haze.

"Except for its outline," Alvaro said, pulling my elbow into his stomach. "You're right."

"The outline gives it shape. What would it be without its shape?"

"They're just straight lines." He dragged me through the line of people waiting to enter.

"Every building and garden we've seen," I said from behind him, "their shape is what makes them recognizable to people."

He slid his elbow from mine, held my hand, walked ahead of me.

We crossed the Sienne where bikers, joggers, readers, and writers congregated; lovers strolled arm in arm, hand in hand. His camera wasn't

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hanging around his neck, I noticed. We bought an expensive camera for this trip and he became a new-found photographer, making me wait for him to catch the perfect light at precise angles, the splash of color in the foreground to hi-light the background.

"There aren't as many black and brown people here," he said.

I had already noticed. "Does that make you uncomfortable?" I asked the back of his head.

"It just makes me feel Mexican."

The red flashing hand across the street made us stop walking. People surrounded us, smelling like their special Paris fragrance.

"There's the restaurant we had our first dinner," I said, trying to gauge the reason for his bad mood. We were so excited to eat outside, talk about the sights we wanted to see. We laughed at the girl wearing oversized sunglasses, skin-tight black jeans and a rose in her hair. "You never took our picture."

"Your stomach couldn't handle their raw hamburger." He looked both ways, eager to rush across the street. "We had to run back to our flat."

"I hope I didn't ruin our first meal." My apologies often happened after the fact, when he told me he was mad about something I didn't know I did. I had already apologized for my sensitive stomach. The surrounding crowd nudged us forward. I planted my feet on the ground and squeezed Alvaro's hand.

I was relieved when the light turned. On the opposite sidewalk he stopped, dropped my hand, looked at his feet, let the crowd pass. "It's just the way you're shaped."

Was he talking about my slight weight gain or our brief, interrupted conversation about Paris architecture? "What do you mean?"

"Everything," he said, smiling, as though coming to a realization. "We're shaped differently." He walked ahead.

How was I shaped, exactly, in his mind? I decided I wouldn't speak again until he showed me the surprise.

He looked behind to see if I was following. We walked a few more blocks. I struggled to keep up, sucking in the humid air. We stopped at another blinking red hand. I wiped my sweat, lit a cigarette.

"You'll have to put that out soon," he said, then kept walking.

He wouldn't let me smoke in our condo and wouldn't kiss me until I brushed my teeth. He had complained a few times already that the streets here smell like cigarettes.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Did we walk around the block?" I snuffed my cigarette with my shoe. There were no monuments here. No fancy restaurants. It could be a street in any big American city.

His sweaty hand grabbed mine, led me into a jewelry shop. We had been searching for the perfect rosary to buy his sister.

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A black woman with braids led us to a case at the back of the store. He thanked her, watched her leave, got down on one knee. "Will you marry me?"

An older man turned his head slightly so he could see us. A beautifully coiffed woman pretended to arrange jewelry behind the counter.

Alvaro stood, held my hands. "Walking around without you today, I realized how much I miss you." His voice cracked. He'd been nervous and pensive. That explained his mood. "I've wanted to ask you for a long time."

We looked at the rings. Each had its own spotlight.

"We'll pick one out together," he said.

The rings were beautiful. Gold. Silver. Platinum. Same-sex marriage laws recently passed in Maryland.

"What do you think?" he asked.

The black woman walked towards us with a wide smile. Alvaro shook his head and she stopped. She took a few more steps. Alvaro shook his head again. The old man stepped closer to the case of watches. The coiffed woman slid the counter door shut.

That night, we ate Italian. Eating at French restaurants wasn't high on our priority list. I had the chicken parmigiana. Alvaro had shrimp scampi and ordered wine by the glass. Would I wear the ring all the time? Which hand? Which finger? How would I explain it to the kids at school? I don't know why I didn't immediately say yes. Why I couldn't say anything. I used to tell friends and family that I wanted to get married if it was ever possible.

The next day, Alvaro said, we'd spend two hours at the Rodin museum, quickly tour Napoleon's tomb across the street, then off to the ballet at the Opera Bastille. In bed that night he gave me a peck on the cheek before rolling over.

The Rodin museum was a small building, its grounds surrounded by a brick wall.

"Even Jasmine said we had to see this," Alvaro said. Jasmine, his younger sister, was no art-lover. She hadn't even seen the replicas of Rodin's statues in Philadelphia.

We stood in line to pay 20 euros each, an exorbitant price to pay for one artist. The d'Orsay, with its Monets and Van Goghs, cost less. Napoleon's tomb cost eight.

"He's the most renowned sculptor of the modern era," Alvaro said as though reading from his tour book. I chuckled about the way he said sculptor, emphasizing the -or. He stepped out of line to see what was ahead of us.

This first building turned out to be the Gift Shop and Ticket Office. Outside, we came upon yet another stunning Paris garden—roses burst-

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ing reds, pinks and yellows; perfectly trimmed conical bushes lining the paths.

“Unreal,” he said.

A tourist passed us, smoking.

I craved a cigarette. “Where are the sculptures?” I asked. A second brick building in front of us stood plain, rectangular. “In that house?”

Alvaro unfolded the map. “In the gardens.”

“Where’s The Thinker?”

He turned the map around. “Past these bushes.”

“Where that horde of lemmings is going?” I laughed, but he didn’t.

He handed me the map so he could better grasp his camera. We turned the corner and there it was. We had already seen the statue’s cast in the states, but this one was hidden by bushes, as if the architects of Paris wanted to surprise you with their iconic sites. They did the same thing with the Eiffel Tower. You came off the Metro, walked down the street and just as you asked yourself, “Where is this thing?” it appeared, monstrous, from behind an apartment building and overhanging tree.

Alvaro turned to me with his mouth open. What did he admire? He never liked art. Outside of work, he liked college sports—basketball, football, even a little hockey.

He took pictures from every angle—side, back, front, front-left, front-right, roses in front, roses in back. Straight couples posed for pictures, trying to fit their full asses on the small base, elbows on thighs, chins on hands. Most got the position wrong, had to look back at the statue, then switched legs and arms. They laughed. Even the people watching laughed, encouraging the models to narrow their eyes to channel the essence of The Thinker.

“Try to look more serious,” the Australian who snapped our picture said.

“It’s easy to change my expression to serious, from boredom,” I said through the side of my mouth.

I looked at Alvaro. The Australian had to wait for me to face forward before he snapped the picture. Alvaro’s expression had morphed easily into The Thinker’s proxy.

The Australian handed the camera to Alvaro.

“You want us to take yours?” Alvaro asked.

“No.” The Australian looked at his wife. They must have been in their 60s. Probably a dream vacation. “We can’t crouch down like you young people anymore.” Probably bad knees.

We got out of the way of the other amateur models, ending up amongst the gaggle of picture-takers.

“Why do you like it so much?” I asked. “Besides his body.”

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He ignored my joke, stroking the unshaved hairs on his chin. He couldn't look at me.

"You're not getting my sarcasm," I said. "Paris has sucked the humor out of you."

"I'm trying to soak in the culture." He spoke through pursed lips.

We stood at the edge of an endless supply of people snapping pictures.

"By pretending you like something you don't?"

"What makes you think I don't like it?" He let his camera, strapped around his neck, fall.

A man wearing a fedora bumped into me and apologized in a language I didn't know.

"You used to make fun of art," I said. "We'd guess the titles of abstract paintings because they don't make sense. Remember?" I punched his arm like we were old pals.

"I wonder what he's thinking." His hands fidgeted on top of his camera. "That's what I like, if you want to know. The mystery. His thoughts are tough, world-changing, yet he's so comfortable with himself."

A bird shit on the statue's shoulder. They must scrub away the stains every hour. If I stayed here long enough, I'd probably see the black cleaning lady come out with her pail and brush. It wasn't fair. For her, this statue was a toilet. The black and white shit hardened quickly into a streak on the statue's chest. The bird chirped. It may have been there as long as we had.

"Will you say something?" Alvaro asked.

I studied the statue like it was a cathedral—lines, outlines, curves that make the whole. "I disagree."

"With what?"

"He's not comfortable with himself."

"Look at his face. His posture. His nudity."

I pointed. "Look at his left toe."

His eyes followed the imaginary line from my pointer finger.

"It's raised," I said.

"Seriously? His toe?"

"People have it all wrong. They come here to gawk at this must-see, but they walk away wrong." I backed up until the bushes pressed into my back. "I don't want to walk away wrong." Paris air scented with smoke and sweet flowers, the perfectly planned garden, and the head of Rodin's masterpiece perched above Alvaro's right shoulder. "No matter what's going through his mind, no matter what the rest of his body is doing—" The bird chirped one last time and flew away. "—No one can tell me that his toe doesn't make you wonder what he doubts."