

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Mira Skalkottas

The Other Side of the River

WHEN I LEFT PARMA, it was steamy with heat. I filled my week there with listless wandering, past shoes and *parfumeria* and *caffes*, little doll cups of espresso littering the tables of bars in the squares with pigeons and statues of Ghirardelli and that crazy horse one near the *Monumento al Parmigianino*.

A- would come home from work in the evenings and we would go running in the Duke's Garden on the other side of the river, *Ottro Torrente* in Italian. We had met the previous summer on a Greek island talking about Gabriele Salvatores's movie *Mediterraneo* and Jennifer Egan's book *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, or *Il tempo è un bastardo* in Italian. Time is a bastard.

Other evenings, he worked late, and I would walk over to the park in the dim light of late dusk alone, and I would jog slowly because it was more like swimming, the air was so saturated with moisture. Mosquitos hit my face and arms in the dusky light. The bridge across the river was a big stone affair, but the river itself was overgrown with grass and trees, so the other side was foreshortened and seemed closer than it was.

In the setting sun, the buildings of this working-class neighborhood burned with gelato colors like mango and raspberry and pistachio. Here we'd come to dine one evening at a trattoria named *Virgile*, at a little sidewalk table, then sipped an aged grappa--inside after everyone had left, chatting with the barista--that was smokey and cruel like love.

After jogging, I would walk back across the river that was not really a river in summer but a grassland smudging the border between river and city, and even though it was 21 or 22 hours there was still light in the sky draining very slowly like a last drink. The lanterns would come on as I walked, lanterns that didn't stand on the pavement but grew out of the sides of the houses on their own wrought-iron arms, and they were like ushers in a play lighting my way, and I thought of the first line of Dante's *Inferno*.

It was the hottest part of the summer, and I was suffering. I had flown in from California and couldn't sleep. There was no AC, and two bodies in the bed. We lay with all the windows and the shutters to the palazzo open and the mosquitoes and the rapid-fire Italian of youths prowling would come in from the street, just below this side of the river. I would finally fall asleep in the early morning and sleep half the day, then wake hot and groggy to wander the city again, mesmerized but half-asleep, red welts on my arms and calves.

I finally bought a fan, slathered on repellent, and went to bed with a wet washcloth draped over me, and A- reeled back from it calling it a squid, and we laughed so hard when we should have been sleeping, and it was like the itching that comes from a wound healing.