

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

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Weightlessness

When I was younger, I spent a year in Lisbon. Something you do when your geography fails you; go, travel, learn another language, fill up the resume of your Life.

My mom was born in Lisbon, she tells me stories of a bright childhood by the sea. A part of me always wonders, if I went, would I feel like superman if he could set foot in Krypton, the home he never knew? The right gravity in the right atmosphere, finally. Who would I be in Lisbon?

Included in the travel package are the months I spend fantasizing and telling people I'm thinking of going to Lisbon when they ask how I'm doing, then realizing I've said the same thing three months ago, yet here I am. Included is meticulously researching, planning, organizing, itinerizing, downloading apps that teach you to ask for wholewheat bread in a Portuguese bakery. Included is the goodbye party I invite all my friends to, even those like Sarah, whom I hadn't seen in much longer than I'll be spending abroad. Realizing that I'll miss her, that I've been missing her for a long time now. Included is wondering if things would have been different here if I held more goodbye parties like this. Spent less time missing. Maybe all the answers are simple and localized, maybe I should stay and find out?

No one will take me seriously then. I already promised a grand departure, something more climactic. Fasten your seatbelt. Stay on course. Included is giving away at the party the life pieces that have lingered in my closets and cupboards, that now have no utility, only context. Elvis Parsley, the giant green duck that Rachel, Sarah and I practiced kissing on, and following our cue, Rachel's dog humped. Kim inherits him; Sarah and I exchange co-conspiratorial looks. "What?" Kim asks, and Sarah says, "Watch out, he's a player, that one."

Because part of going to Lisbon for a year is weightlessness, and I have two books on weightlessness, so when Wallace asks me, "Can I have the guitar?" I hear myself say, "Sure, I can't play anyhow."

'To die by your side is such a heavenly way to die,' Ben wrote on the back before he gave it to me in Grade 11, and we spent the night throwing paper airplanes with our favourite lyrics off the 15th floor, hoping they will collide with some dead-souled businessman and remind him what it was like back when he could still feel.

Two weeks later Ben and I broke up, so he never taught me how to play, and I haven't touched the guitar since, because we will never die by each other's side. And now it's in my living room, proof in permanent marker that someone once thought I was the loveliest thing on the planet, and I know I should let youthful loves slide into bittersweet nostalgia, but all nostalgia is bittersad to me, so I let Wallace have it.

At the end, when everyone leaves with my things, I feel made of helium, unbound to the ground. What have I done? Included is holding on to the earth a little harder the rest of the month, and all the way to the airport, the plane, until I leave it behind as I spring into the clouds.

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I'm in Lisbon at last. I had compiled an itinerary of locations and activities, it is rich in variety and possibility, exhaustive and exhausting. There will be time enough later, I decide. For now, I spend the days reading my Portuguese textbook on the steps to my apartment. It seems like a summer thing to do, if your dress is floral and ruffled enough, if your straw hat is sufficiently wide. More often, I'm idling with it spread on my knees, studying the cobblestoned streets. I'm watching the masses of people walking past me, seamlessly reabsorbing into the Lisbon landscape the way I long to. Ideally, I'd latch onto one of them as they pass, anyone would do really, like a burr, like I'm a parasitic alien. I'd spend a while studying their patterns, memorizing the names of their loved ones, their little in-jokes, how they order their coffee. Then, piece by piece I'd displace my host, metamorphose into them until I forget I've ever been anyone else.

One of the passersby stops once, a Lisbon ambassador at last. He leans against the flaking blue railing of the stairs and lights a cigarette; I watch his Adam's apple dance up and down his throat as he takes drags. Passersby give him dirty looks for engulfing them in smoke, but he's oblivious or apathetic, a dragon too immense to mind the earth beneath. His boyish brown hair sticks to his face in the heat, in the kind of way that makes you desperate to brush it away from his eyes.

Say something, be the Lisbon-you. But what? Carefully practiced phrases in Portuguese bubble up in my head. *Where is the grocery store? I need medical assistance. Can I have that to go?*

He speaks first, Portuguese so fluent the words fuse and blow by me before I even have a chance to grasp at the sounds, never mind their meaning.

I want to say, *please slow down, I'm new to the language*, but nothing beyond bakery orders comes to my head. I feel betrayed by my book, even if I've spent more time cradling than reading it. I lift it to show him the title, leaving it to him to puzzle out my predicament. "Inglês?" I ask.

He gestures, 'so-so'. I have gotten used to the omnipresence of English, come to expect Hollywood, McDonalds, the Beatles, to colonize, universalize it.

"Emily," I point at myself. I wonder if everyone in the world has a name. If that's the only common denominator of language.

"Rui."

"Nice to meet you."

He nods and takes another drag. I wait for him to say something as he goes on burning through his cigarette. Eventually I blurt, "Did you know Dolphins have names for each other?"

"Dolphins?" he tastes the unfamiliar word like a strange flavour on his tongue.

I look up Dolphins in Portuguese on my phone.

"Golfinho. They have Golfinho names," I say

"This, golfinho tell you?"

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"Yes."

"And you have Golfinho name too?"

"Yes. Eee eeeee," I screech rhythmically.

"Nice to meet, 'Eee eeeee,'" his puts his all into the screech, any dolphin would be fooled. I laugh, loud enough that I startle a pigeon.

We speak for a while longer, but our more intricate thoughts stammer across the language barrier, like ships plodding through shallow waters. This is the longest conversation I've had since I came to Lisbon. I mention I'm in search of employment.

"I, ah... trabalho... here," he points to a building. I look up a translation of the signage. "*Hope for Paws.*" He checks his watch, then signals an invitation for me to follow.

The dog shelter is hiring, and I've had my fill of stair-sitting, so I apply and get a job. Rui and I spend our summer walking the dogs, filling up water bowls, wrestling over ravaged tennis balls in the grass. The shelter has two types of 'guests', mostly. The soft-furred, twinkly eyed, squishy-snouted pets, which we think of as transients. And those who are oversized, patchy-furred, cross-eyed, with long awkward limbs, unloved and unloving, the ones who couldn't shit on schedule, couldn't delight children, couldn't cuddle on laps, couldn't bear staying alone in apartments; they will never be adopted. The ugly ones we love the most, because they are ours.

Rui loves them especially. He lets them lick his whole face, he waits patiently until they pick up all the flavours and scents of the day off his hands. He brings them old socks to chew into shreds. On Thursdays, he waits for them in the room at the end of the hall.

Davi is one of the shelter's older residents. His name means 'beloved'. He's missing most of his left ear, which had been shot. That day I bring him his favourite, cheese. Eyes light up and die as I pass among the cages on my way to him. Tails wag wildly, the dogs leap at the bars, barking after me. I don't stop, though, and soon their excitement crumples and they curl back into themselves, eyes following me.

When I come near Davi's kennel he grows ecstatic. His tail jerks around so fast it seems it might take off without him. He squeezes his snout through the bars.

I open his kennel and let his happiness wash over me in a rain of kisses, a flurry of wagging and running around me in happy circles. I scratch the matted wisps of fur on his head, the soft velvet of his remaining ear. His tail wags even harder as he rubs his head against my jeans, demanding more pets. I put the leash on him and his brown eyes grow wide, full of balls and cars and trees and clouds. I lead him down the corridor, through a cacophony of barks.

We stop before the door at the end of the hall. Davi tries to pull me ahead to the stairwell, but eventually gives up and looks at me questioningly.

I knock on the door.

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Davi gives a small whimper, a sound so thin it's nearly subvocal, a shiver through the air. He pulls at his leash again.

Must be something about this room, I always thought. Who knows how far back dogs can smell.

Rui opens the door. I'm forced to drag Davi in. I hoist him onto the surface of the table, his soft golden curls sliding on the cold smoothness of the glinting chrome. I'm doing my job.

I hold him down, whisper words to calm him, like I always do. All the tender comforts English and Portuguese can muster, even though he does not understand anything I say and doesn't speak my language.

The words don't calm Davi. Rui prepares a syringe. He gives it a couple of squeezes to rid it of bubbles, releasing drops of some cough-syrup-pink chemical into the air.

Davi wiggles. I pin him down. "Shh, it's okay," I say, whether it is or it isn't.

Rui grabs his leg. He inserts the needle.

Davi jerks so hard the needle tears through his leg. This happens sometimes. Davi's blood squirts out, spraying me, dripping on the metallic surface. He cries. He struggles but I wrap myself around his body.

This time Rui grasps Davi's leg forcefully. Davi whimpers. The needle goes in deep. The pink stuff drains from the syringe and go swimming around in his blood. His body convulses, once, twice. Then he releases the last of the air he was holding onto and grows still. His eyes are wide, vacated. Mine are wet.

That's when Rui takes my hand.

He leads me out, striding briskly, and I follow, careful not to break our silence. Language holds for us things both to gain and to lose. He takes me to the edge of the park nearby. We come to a block of gray concrete, with birds and crude phrases graffitied all over. A tunnel worms through its centre, week-old puddles accumulating beneath. There is no real path to get here, just vegetation, untamed, disordered, thorny, raw. This is Rui's spot.

By now the nervous tension has collected in his muscles, it's crackling against my skin. His face is glistening, feverish, sweat splitting his hair into stringy locks. His breathing reminds me of a cyclone on the lookout for something, finding me in lieu. We've played this game before.

He leans against the side of the tunnel, his back uncomfortably bent in its curve. I let him pull me close. He likes to bite my lip and lick the inside. Sometimes, he unfastens his belt and takes my wrist, and shuts his eyes like death might be a relief. Sometimes, he puts my hand under his navel and waits, asking me with his body language, which we speak best. Sometimes, I slide my hand into his pants and he moans a small and tortured sound. I trace lines and curves. I rest my head beside him on the gray tunnel wall, inches from his face and his body's field of warmth, watching his eyelids shudder. Sometimes, the touch gets too much and too little, and he pulls my hand away and replaces it with his. He rubs himself with the

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desperation of a last soldier standing. He groans like a dying animal. He shoots his load, then. It melts into the puddles, mixes with the dirt.

Sometimes, he cries, then.

Is this Lisbon-me?

I tell him one day in bed, "I feel like we don't really know each other."

"You know me, Golfinho," he says, voice scorched with tabaco, exhaling the cloud of smoke that always punctuates our sex.

"Tell me something about your family."

"My dad ..." he takes a moment searching for the word, "um advogado... lawyer? My young brother play foot-ball. My sister live in hospital. You want to know this things? Why? Is boring. I know you more. I know you" - he touches the centre of my chest - "here. You, you like me. Alone in night. Alone in room with people, all their haha, hoo-hoo. Your head," he taps a finger on my forehead, "Always searching, searching, searching. Deus sabe what you searching."

He knows this the way I know that sometimes he needs to cry to climax, to climax to cry. That the emotion is too immense, must diffuse across his body, expel through multiple exit points. Sometimes, it needs to reverberate between polarities, pain and pleasure, before the resonance is enough, before it can sing.

Perhaps I can know him without knowing him. Know him outside the banality of coffee dates and shared music tastes, as we are in the invisible hours of the night, in silences so deep the world might have drowned, and what's left beneath. Maybe it's a truer type of knowing.

I want to explain, but I don't know if it'll translate. He smiles and leans over to kiss me, sliding a hand between my thighs. "Garoto estúpido," I say, giggling, and kiss him back. Why does his sister live in a hospital? I never find out.

Later, in my own bed, I question again why I came to Lisbon. The toothed, breathless darkness I tried to give away along with my things has stuck, has snuck in my suitcase, has flown with me all the way across the Atlantic. It still greets me in the spaces between wakefulness and sleep. *Is there a Lisbon-me?*

When I finally return home, a year later, I unzip my suitcase and there it is, the darkness. Bitten into my folded shirts. Cold in my jeans pockets. It comes out stretching, crawling, catching in the curtains. As I unpack, I scour for redundancies to throw or give away, but there is nothing, no keepsakes. I still feel as weightless as when I purged my belongings a year ago. I thought I'd refill so quickly.

One day, much later, I find at the back of my closet the dress I bought for a date. "Obrigado por ser sempre o meu arco-íris depois da tempestade" - "Thank you for always being my rainbow after the storm," it says under a little rainbow printed across the chest. I ended up wearing something burgundy and bareback for Rui instead. But I remember another day I wore this dress, when I saw a rainbow outside my window and thought it would be funny, a joke between me and the sky. That day I took Davi and

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another dog, Breno, and we wandered all across the city. I remember the mosaic of the white and yellow houses, and the red rooftops like a forest of mushrooms cascading down to the glistening waterfront. I remember buying Pão com chouriço from an old woman's street cart, and Davi and Breno stealing most of the sausage from inside the bun, alternating feats of emotional blackmail and well-timed opportunism. I remember sitting by the fountain my mom fell into when she was little. I remember accidentally dropping half a cone of caramel ice cream inside and later joking with her on the phone, this could be our family rite of passage, clumsy falls into the Fountain of Green Windows. Sarah laughs at how this is all I brought from Lisbon, a dress with a rainbow. I barely wear it, but still, I like the space it occupies, the weight of it.