

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

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### Rue de Hugo

Of Gordes, Provence, in the south of France, there stretches a street which meanders near the hilltops. It is called rue de Hugo, and seemingly forgotten, there belong winding cobblestoned paths covered with reddened, shrivelled autumn leaves/ thick blankets of snow I have sunk into before/ with rows of pink plum trees/ masses of brilliant orange sunlight. But regardless of season, the street strangely manages to possess within itself a languid, listless quality; going nowhere, it seems to go around in circles like a manège at a carnival – it may end with rusty cliffs that drop and overlook the great, blurry ocean, complemented by the rain and mist which comes often; it may end with a visit to an obscure, hidden, 16<sup>th</sup> century French tea house that even the locals have forgotten; it, too, may very well end in circles. The façades of the nostalgia shops selling old English chessboards and skinny horsemen, and boîte-à-musique, and 1700-year-old bronze medals with Louis XIV's portrait delicately-carved onto both sides, and varnished anachronisms of siege and plaque and bombings, and of the laundromats, and of the flower boutiques, and of the *cafés* . . . *these façades were once bright, and were once flushed with brilliant life. But not anymore. Now it is a dull colour, and represents little more to anyone else except me.*

*I realise; having spoken of rue de Hugo with the amatory, almost child-like intimacy as I have done is characteristic of one taking up residence on the street, holed up in some chateaux; another possibility includes the sharing of an apartment above a purple-and-white shophouse on which terrasse is lined with peonies, and tulips, and orchids; or, at least, of owning close proximity and frequent visits. It points in the opposite direction, however; I speak of it with uncertain, yet fond memory.*

*Sometimes, at the most arbitrary of moments, here in Lyon where everything is to be of proclivity and habit, when I am having my morning coffee – black without sugar, with a choquette by the side – on the outside terrasse, or when the radio is tuned to Radio Neptune Classique or France Musique Le Contemporaine, anytime, really, the mine wanders and drifts, rue de Hugo enters, and more recently than ever, I remember the life I had there as a little child, there on rue de Hugo.*

These remembrances simmer, teasingly, like Jessica Rabbit's entrance in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (a film I often recommend to my business partners, after which I never fail to receive assurances and promises they would purchase the digital video disc at the nearest opportune); sensual, slow, and I am unsure of their origins. I remember the beautiful games played with friends whose names have evanesced, having evanesced much too similar to the white, wisps of smoke from the Marlboro cigarettes we used to smoke together, but then facing an antagonistic summer breeze, and coming and drifting back, now, surely to me, their names: Eliott, Mathéo, Mylan, and a girl we called Julie.

From the fenêtre above rue de Hugo the faces of frail, old men and women peeked out. They looked on at us with their wrinkled, cynical perspectives, with their wrinkled, crumbling lips tutting us as we passed by below them, with their hardened eyes and minds which were undoubt-

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edly the consequence of adulthood and of having death as a neighbour. This, I see it, now, within myself; the eyes with which I envy the children twirling, and spinning on the playground, without surgically-replaced knee caps, without yellowed, peeling callouses bruising their feet, without tremors in the hand and the tremble in the walk. But then, on rue de Hugo, when we were young, and we were beautiful, we did not care for them, thought them nothing, thought them little else but cold, and shrivelled, and crude resemblances to the remnants of peeled vegetables; and we made promises upon shooting stars streaking across the great night sky that we would never become them.

We were children then, and we did that children did, and we never intended to change for anyone. We played Jeu d'attrape, and Tireur, and Bilboquet, and with the pebbles and sticks from the earth, and always together. Even in the rain we continued. We ran, and laughed, and screamed. We basked in the rain. We savoured it as it came down and pricked our skins and faces with its delicate freshness, and unimagined warmth, and terrible, frightful beauty!

Many moments like these spent on rue de Hugo catch up to me, now, and offers me life's greatest surprise! Even the possibility of death is quelled, and the bleakness is conquered no matter how brief. How much I have forgotten! It comes back, now, like choppy waves against shore, relentless, fast-paces; I cannot ignore, and must choose to relish in them, in these re-surfacing memories, on all those days and nights.

How it was on some smothered, brooding June morning stumbled upon rue de Hugo/ how it was then – in the small town of Gordes, Provence on the narrow, blooming street – that Elliot, Mylan, Julie and I met (but then, I did not know their names) at Chapelle Des Pénitents Blancs/ how it was darkness triumphed, and I imagined God smiling and nodding in approval, as our paths collided in the shabby chapel/ how, throughout the preachings and sermons by men who would never understand us, we – even Julie – crushed the saltine crackers for communion, and crafted shapes on the stone ground with the crackers' crumbs; the shapes were thirteen-year-olds' notions of a pénis's apperance, and mine, I recall was a rainbow, Elliott's, a launching rocket, Mathéo's, a  $y = \sin(2x) \cos(e^x)$  quadratic graph, Mylan's, a samurai sword, and Julie's, a tiny squiggle/ how, when Mother Celine went round collecting donations, she caught us, and mumbled, "La Baise," and swooned, and I had to catch her in my arms as in the scene in *Gone with the Wind*, but she was a whale and I dropped her and Julie laughed, and Elliot laughed, and Matteo laughed, and Mylan laughed, and I grinned like a Cheshire cat, and laughed, too/ how we were barred from entering all religious establishments in Gordes/ how our parents were furious, and

How it was on Christmas's Eve, when we were alone together by the cliffs that we smoked Marlobro cigarettes and swigged from a Jack Daniel's bottle for the first time/

How when Mylan was ousted as a homosexual, and was caught by his father tongue-kissing the preacher's son, and was near whipped to death by this drunken father/ how we stuck by his side, never leaving no matter what was said about us, about him, by the church, by the townspeople, by our parents, by schoolmates/

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How when I fell off my bicycle having swerved to avoid an écreuil, and scraped my knee and forearm, they paraded me through the streets, chanting "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité! Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité!" laughing, and I laughed with them, too, and they brought me to the hôpital, and refused to leave before knowing of my condition/ how my bicycle was gone when we went back looking for it, and was probably across the ocean having been purchased by a Serbian/

How we screamed our names across the great, sweeping ocean, and hoped it would carry on to the other side to hear/

How my first kiss, in the blissful rain and shine near the chapel we were barred from, was with Julie/ How she whispered in my ear, "Je t'aime," and I responded with utmost certainty and wistful longing, "Je vous aime aussi, Julie. Je ne partirai jamais,"/ how this declaration of love and heart for the other was stronger than any written word, any contract, any broken strings/ How rue de Hugo represents these moments for me/

How on some murky night wherein the horned moon hung above in the sorrowed starless skies, and from the fractures of the universe rain came down hard, silver and slippery, sluggish and silent/ how it fell over the black-tar roads, and over the cobblestoned streets, and over the Red Cedar Trees/ how it fell over the troubled lakes, and over the yellow and purple poppy fields/ how it fell over my home/ how the world, from where I stood in front of my father, seemed a mirage, dimmed and blurred by the rain/ how it seemed unimaginable that his "We are leaving" could have possessed within them more viciousness and callousness than any other word in any language/ how it hurt/ how silence and weeping ensues/ how I left Gordes, Provence at nineteen-years-old.



*I live, now, in Lyon, and have been for several years. Before that, I lived in Amiens, Picardy, the north of France, as a young man working as a leatherworker. It is similar to Gordes, Amiens is, but of the people I saw grave and sombre if headstones were personified. Even the children, too, stripped of the innocence and sweetness especial for themselves. I never saw them run. I never saw them laugh. Amiens, when I was there, was similar to Gordes, but where no endless streams of purple blooms and flowers flow, no very singular beauty that which only belongs to Gordes, Provence, without the old, withered charm pervading every stone of every path of every street – Gordes has that, rue de Hugo has that, too, but Amiens does not.*

*I met Adrienne Garnier there, in Amiens, before we moved to Lyon. It was many years back, a remembrance shrouded by the gentle yet bleared passing of nights, of previous and recent occurrences that were more haunting and more undying. It could have very well been six, seven years, perhaps more. I do not remember how Adrienne and I met very well; it is, as I have said, of certain mud-diness, I remember only it was a evening and by a park bench.*

*The details thenceforth remain bleared. I proposed in the succeeding months, and although Adrienne agreed to wed and be my faithful wife, I wondered the reasons behind her decision, hers and mine – We called it love for such is the folly of the young, but how could it have been so when we barely knew the touch of the other, the word of the other, the name of the other as it rolled of our tongues and our spines as we called the other, when we only knew the periods of jouissance*

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*and euphoria and rapture and bliss, and not the melancholy and the dread and the hollowness and the emptiness and the pain?*

*We stabbed at its definitions, guessing vaguely and wildly, when all around us was growing darkness and nescience and ignorance deeper than the nights', and we tried to make it ours, our own, we really tried, to breath something of beauty and value into it. How could we have declared it love although its meaning was not impressed upon us, when it was child's meaning, when all it was was but a shard, when we dressed upon it layers and layers and layers of guise, giving it adornments and accessories, and drowned out the blackening moments? We kissed, yes, but we did not feel. We made love, yes, but we did not touch. So yet, how could it have been love, what we called it, when we thought it always beautiful and lasting, and not to be sometimes cruel and like a flame, when we crumbled like a stack of cards with only gentle blows and tests? How could it have been love, what we called it, when it was only fools' love, and was in fact not love at all?*

*She was pretty, Adrienne was, and her appearance was what drawn me to her in the beginning. Time was wicked, however, and came. It came suddenly and seemingly without word.*

*Time came, not merely of the passing of nights and years, but in other ways as well – for I could see the sad in her eyes, and in mine when I looked in the mirror, my face wan and grey, the insistence with which she presented herself phlegmatic and unreadable, how she barred me from her emotions and from what she thought, how we spoke not with our words but with the flinch, the sigh. And how on several occasions I gazed at my reflection and said, "You're no longer young anymore; Adrienne isn't too," and he did not smile as I hoped he would, so it was really then I knew I was not young anymore. "Je t'aime," I say to her every morning before I leave for the Saxe Gambetta, pecking her on her cheek, and she says it back; we both know these words hold no meaning, hold the weight of sand caught in the whirling winds of a bright, autumn's day, but we say it anyway because that is what love has become.*