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IT'S ALWAYS SOMEBODY'S PARIS: AN EXAMINATION OF PLACE IN
NONFICTION WRITING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iv
Chapter	
1 Preparation.....	1
2 Paris	14
Arrival	14
Spent Shells of Celebration	15
Negative Space	20
Prince Charming.....	22
Les Bains	23
Like Church to Me	28
Our Lady, My Lady.....	33
Trying	34
Rome	38
Fallibility	42
3 Paris as Place	45
4 Why Paris?.....	60
Bibliography	65
Vita	67

ABSTRACT

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By Jessica E. Sculthorpe

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This thesis examines the importance of place in nonfiction writing, using both the author's personal experience as a student in Paris and the writings of other Americans in Paris, including members of the Lost Generation. The first two chapters examine the

author's experience as a young student in Paris. The third and fourth chapters contain the author's reflection on the process of writing the thesis and an examination of the ways in which other writers have written about Paris in their own nonfiction writing.

Chapter 1: Preparation

It wasn't at all how I had pictured it. When I walked out the door I had no idea what Josh was up to, but then realization hit me and turned my stomach to lead. The car, the flowers, the tiny box wrapped in silver paper. *I'm not even wearing shoes*, I thought. And there was Josh wearing a red shirt, a bandana tied as a headband to keep the sweat out of his eyes in the pits at the concert tonight. His black eyeliner would run anyway. I looked at Josh. He was wriggling with childlike excitement, swinging his shoulders back and forth, fidgeting. "What's this?" I asked, even though I knew exactly what this was. Josh was proposing to me. In my driveway.

A year and a half before that day in the driveway, I walked into a tiny, packed café in central Pennsylvania with my friend Erica. We were there to see our friends in a hardcore music band from our small Christian college. Despite the outwardly conservative image of our college, the music scene was huge and dominated by metal and hardcore bands. I went to far more shows than classes. Erica spotted Josh sitting on the floor, a small scrap of a guy in the crowded café. I told him he looked like a character out of a Tim Burton movie, with his black and white striped socks pulled up under his

tattered and patched knee-length shorts, and he said I looked like Britney Spears in my black pants and blue cropped top I'd borrowed from my roommate's closet, over which I'd pulled a black fishnet shirt.

He was tiny, only a couple of inches taller than me and skinny, with a rash of tattoos spreading down one arm, bleached white hair, a nose ring, and an ex-wife. Erica whispered the details of his quick marriage and even quicker divorce. Although he didn't look it, he was five years older than my twenty. He was like Peter Pan with tattoos, a little boy lost in an adult world. It was endearing; I wanted to help him, protect him. I couldn't believe that he would be remotely interested in me, but a few months later he drove two hours to my parents' house to take me on a date.

Josh's appearance shocked my parents. They were still trying to absorb my transformation from quiet Christian school girl to club-going hardcore music lover. I'm sure their idea of Christian college wasn't the reality I inhabited – the “dry campus” was anything but, and I had broken nearly every rule in the book during my two years there. For the most part, I didn't get caught, although I did have to mop the floors in the stairwell of my dorm after being found by campus security with some friends in a boys' apartment after hours. In a way it was a delayed adolescence for me, rebelling against all the rules I had followed so strictly throughout middle and high school. Before leaving for Messiah, I had never had a beer, never smoked a cigarette, never kissed a boy.

As a child I had been shy, almost painfully so. I entered high school still quiet, trying not to make waves. We had our arguments as any parents and child do, but I was

still the girl they knew, the girl they had raised. When I left for college I made a pact with myself to shed my inner shy girl and have fun. I found friends quickly, the impossibly cool kids I thought I could never hang out with in high school, and I fit myself into their world, their music. I loved every minute of my time away from home, but the tension with my parents was escalating constantly. They couldn't understand the ways I had changed and they were terrified of my new friends and new attitude. In hindsight, I can see the ways in which I was struggling. I was so worried about maintaining my newly-crafted image that I let it dictate my actions. I was definitely not the shy girl anymore, but I had lost my compass. At the time, though, like many twenty-year-olds, I was convinced that I knew exactly what I was doing.

The real fighting started freshman year when my mom realized I had stretched my earlobes to accommodate the large rings I wore in them. That was the least offensive or dangerous of my behavior, but she didn't know any of that. When I told my parents I wanted to pierce my tongue they threatened to pull me out of school. I settled for piercing my bellybutton and having seven rings in my ears. My friends looked much the same – or worse. I was still on the tame end of the spectrum.

My friend Julie was far less tame. We called her the walking discount – no matter where we were or what we wanted, if Julie could get to the guy in charge we'd get it for free. Four of us made a pilgrimage to the tattoo parlor and walked out having spent a little over a hundred bucks for one tattoo, one eyebrow ring, one tongue ring, and one bellybutton ring. The tattooist couldn't keep his eyes off of Julie, and she liked things

that way. I watched her too, noticing the angle at which she'd hold her head to look up at a guy, the way she'd hold his gaze until he looked down, the hand that would alight, so briefly, on his arm. She was a study in seduction, and I soaked up her lessons. Julie was a tornado, a somewhat violent restructuring of the way I thought of myself. She was the catalyst that brought me out of my head and out of my shyness, but she was also destructive – to herself and to me. Nocturnal hours, partying and what was probably typical college student depression combined with Julie's sometimes melodramatic depressive episodes exacerbated my own struggles, so that by the time I reached the spring of my second year at Messiah, I was deeply entrenched in depression. I could sense that I needed to remove myself from that environment and from my friends there, who only served to encourage my rebellion with drunken nights and a constant stream of boys. I was scared for myself, knowing I was putting myself in danger. I had been to see a counselor at school but he was smug and patronizing and did nothing to help me alleviate my depression. In the end I transferred schools and moved back home to Philadelphia two weeks before classes were to start up again.

Josh and I had met during my last semester away and kept in touch after I moved home. We started dating that fall. It was Josh's septum ring that really sent Dad over the edge – it ran through the bottom of his nose like the nose ring on a bull and thoroughly disgusted Dad. The tongue ring, earrings and tattoos didn't help, either. Our first date was at a diner on South Street in Philadelphia. After we came home, Josh kissed me in my parents' living room, and then went down to the basement to sleep – mom and dad

had decided he was to sleep down there. Perhaps the guest room was too close to me. I didn't argue with them, though. I was thrilled that he even wanted to visit.

Within a few months, my relationship with Josh had gotten serious and fighting with my parents was part of my daily landscape. Moving home curtailed some of my more questionable behavior, but the tension between me and my parents was ratcheted up on an almost daily basis. I didn't have to live at home, but it was easier than finding a place on my own with only a part-time job and a full course load. Mom was horrified by my clothes and hair and couldn't understand why I would choose to dye my hair fire engine red and wear baggy skateboarder pants. Dad would ask me all the time what happened to his sweet little girl. I was furious with them. *This is me*, I would say. The argument was never-ending. Josh just added fuel to the fire. Every conversation seemed to devolve into an argument about me and Josh. My parents were worried – they hoped my relationship with Josh was just a phase, but I was determined that we were going to plan a future together. I knew Josh loved me, and I loved him. I was certain that was enough.

Josh lived in a row house in Harrisburg with a roommate who had a prodigious collection of porn and seven cats. We spent most weekends at his house to escape the tension at mine. I would tell my parents that I was staying at Erica's house, but really Josh and I would sleep crammed in his twin bed under a drafty window, cats scratching at the door all night. Everything about Josh's life became mine – his family, his friends, his church. It was as though I stopped participating in life at home with my parents and lived

only for the weekends at Josh's house. I was tired of the undercurrent of tension that lived just under the surface of every conversation with my parents. Josh's parents accepted me and I was embarrassed and angry with my parents for their refusal to do the same for Josh. I'm sure my parents suspected that I wasn't always staying with Erica, but they never asked specifically so I never volunteered the information. Being with Josh was like being caught in an alternate universe. He possessed the rare and un-ironic sense of wonder about the world that we tend to lose as we leave elementary school. He made inanimate objects talk to each other, used his skills as a graphic designer to create custom decals for his clownish car, and danced with abandon in the pits at the concerts we went to nearly every weekend. I loved the way he looked at the world; I thought it was charming. I shepherded him through difficulties and took care of him without complaint. He loved me completely.

Josh proposed to me after a campaign lasting several months, during which he asked my father at least four times for his blessing. Each time Dad said no. The two of them would go down to the basement to talk, and I would avoid my mom's gaze by retreating to my room. The air vent in the floor of my bedroom connects to the vent in the basement, and I could occasionally overhear snippets of their conversation, especially if Dad and Josh would raise their voices, which happened fairly regularly. Usually it was Josh raising his voice first, trying to make his point (he loved me, he had a steady job at a printing company, he could support me) and dad countering with a terse "I'm asking you to wait." I knew Josh was asking Dad about marrying me, and I knew Dad was saying

no. After the fourth time Dad said no, Josh took matters into his own hands. He waited until my parents were out of town. He, Erica and I were planning to go to a weekend-long concert festival. While Erica and I were inside getting ready, Josh set up the scene in the driveway – the flowers and the small silver box on the driveway in front of my tiny red Acura. Josh loved cars. His own Honda, a half-red, half-yellow thing trimmed with custom-cut vinyl lettering and a horn that played animal noises sat parked on the street during his visits. People would stop their cars to stare. The inside was like a toy store – toys were cemented to the dashboard, hanging from the rearview mirror, and a rubber chicken buckled into the back seat. He had appropriated my car as well, to my parents’ irritation. Silver and yellow stars streaked across the hood, which Josh had carefully cut and placed one weekend while I was sleeping. In retrospect I should have expected something to do with a car, knowing Josh, but I was completely unaware.

Erica hurried me through getting ready and we walked out the door. Josh had laid the flowers on the driveway with the silver box in front. I picked up the flowers. I opened the box and saw the ring. I put the ring on my finger and said yes, put my arms around Josh, and knew I didn’t feel the way I ought to. I was happy, but the happiness was tainted with the knowledge that Josh had done this against my parents’ wishes. Even so I said yes and meant it, knowing that I was enlisting for worse warfare than any I had seen at home up to that point. Only later did Josh point out the license plate he’d had made for my car, an airbrushed picture of a diamond ring with the words “will you marry me” in curlicue script. It was cheap, tacky, totally the kind of accessory Josh loved. I

knew I'd take it off the car as soon as I could manage. I didn't laugh, though, because I knew it would hurt his feelings. In the end I took it off after a week, telling Josh I wanted to keep it safe. I put it in a closet.

I didn't have to call my parents. I knew it would be a horrible conversation, but I felt obligated to apprise them of the situation. I knew I had to tell them what Josh – what I – had done. I wanted them to be happy for me, although I knew that was far too much to ask. At least I wanted to try to diffuse the situation so that when we got home on Sunday they wouldn't kill us. And I was excited and rebellious – I wanted to hurt them in retaliation for hurting me. I waited until we had gotten to our dingy hotel in New Jersey, on our way to the concert. I had already called several friends to share the news. I sat behind the cheap desk and dialed Mom's cell phone. They were somewhere in North Carolina, driving my younger brother around to look at colleges. The phone rang twice before she picked up. My voice shook as I said hello.

“So... I just wanted to tell you... Josh proposed to me.” Silence on the other end.

“And what did you say?” Mom's voice was tight, twanging like a guitar string.

“I said yes.” Josh stood behind me, his hand on my shoulder while he listened to the conversation.

“You did.” A statement, not a question. *Shit*, I thought. I wished she would say something. Silence is worse than anger.

“You need to tell your dad,” she said, and then I heard a shuffling sound and my older sister’s voice came on the line.

“You know you just ruined everyone’s trip, don’t you?” she said. My righteous anger, fueled by a sense of being wronged, died out instantaneously. Suddenly, there were tears in my eyes. Mom took the phone back and said abruptly “I can’t talk about this right now. We’ll talk about it when we get home.” There was no receiver for Mom to slam down, but the sound of the line cutting off was jarring enough. I took a deep breath and leaned against Josh’s shoulder. I cried, but they were more tears of resignation for the situation I’d gotten myself into than tears of anger. I knew what I’d done; now I just had to deal with it.

That night at the concert, my ring started slipping off my finger in the pit. I was terrified of losing it, so Erica put it on – her fingers were bigger than mine. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as she glanced, again and again, at *my* ring on her finger. Erica had been there when Josh bought the ring – she always seemed to turn up at pivotal moments, inserting herself into people’s lives. I ignored the voice in my head asking if she was jealous. All the same, I was glad to take my ring back at the end of the night.

“You deliberately deceived me,” Dad said to Josh the night we got back from New Jersey. “I asked you to wait, and you said you would.”

“I’m ready. We want to get married. Why should we have to wait?” Josh’s voice was plaintive, shaking.

Mom stood by the window in the kitchen, watching us. Josh and me on one side of the table, Dad on the other. I was quite certain if the table wasn’t there that Dad would have throttled both of us. I’d never seen him so angry. He had drawn himself up to his full height of well over six feet and towered over me and Josh. I had never been frightened of my dad until that night. He’d already banished Erica to the car when she tried to butt into the conversation. Dad always hated Erica. He could see right through to her manipulative streak and had even gone so far as to ban her from our house – which I had ignored that weekend so that we could get ready together. So she sat in the car while the battle raged inside. I was frightened of Dad, but I was also angry – why would he object so strenuously to Josh? We believed the same things; we were raised the same way. He looked different than their ideal, but he really wasn’t that different from what they’d always said they wanted for me.

When it was over and Josh and Erica had left, I talked to my brother. He hugged me as I cried about the unfairness of the situation. I asked him if he thought I had done the right thing.

“I’m Switzerland in this whole thing,” he’d said. Smart kid, staying neutral.

It was about a month after our engagement that I first saw the poster advertising summer sessions at the American University of Paris. I passed the poster each day on my

way to class on Temple's art campus. Finally on the fourth or fifth day I ripped the poster off the wall and put it in my bag. I waited until Mom and I met for lunch at one of our favorite restaurants, then pulled the flyer out of my bag and put it on the table.

"I really want to do this," I'd said. Mom studied the flyer for a few moments and then handed it back to me.

"Well, let's talk to your dad about it." It wasn't Dad I was worried about. I knew I could get him to say yes. I just didn't know what Josh would do.

"How long would you be gone?" Josh asked again.

"A little over two months. I'd be back at the end of August," I said, holding Josh's hand. He was uncomfortable, I could tell. He asked me the same questions again and again, and he was fidgeting.

"But is anyone else going? Anyone you know?" He asked.

"No, just me. But I really want to go. I could take art history classes there, go to all the museums, see everything I've been studying," I said, and I could see that he was coming around. I booked my flight when I got home from his house that weekend.

The weeks before I left were a whirlwind of preparation interspersed with trips to Josh's house to assuage his fears. I set up an online journal so that my friends could follow what I was doing, and promised to email Josh as often as I could. He was nervous

about me traveling by myself and about me navigating the airports alone. He'd never been on a plane, though, so the whole idea was overwhelming to him. Josh didn't do well with new situations anyway. He tended to freeze and not be able to readjust and come up with a solution to an unfamiliar problem, and he assumed everyone else was the same way. Therefore he was terrified of travel, especially international flights and different languages. He was scared of me staying in a hotel alone my first night, had no concept of how I'd find my way around in a city that spoke a foreign language despite the years of high school and college French under my belt, was uncertain about the people I'd be hanging out with. I was far more excited than I was nervous, although I was worried that I would be lonely. We had the same few conversations countless times before I left – yes, I know how to get a *Métro* ticket, yes, I'll double lock the door at the hotel, yes, I'll call you as soon as I can. By the time I boarded the plane in Philadelphia my stomach was doing somersaults. I adjusted the reading light above my head and watched my engagement ring throw rainbows on the dingy plastic interior of the plane. I pulled a book out of my bag – *The Five Love Languages*, a book on marriage and relationships that was recommended to us by my friend's father, a chaplain in the Air Force who'd done one premarital counseling session with us before I left – at my parents' insistence. Halfway over the Atlantic I had finished the book and was staring nervously out the window at the black sky, too pumped full of adrenaline to even contemplate closing my eyes. I adjusted my headphones, my CD player playing one of Josh's favorite bands, Zao – one of the bands that played at the café the night we met. He probably wasn't sleeping either, out of nervousness for me or for himself for having to get along

without me. In retrospect I have to wonder if he had a sense of the profound changes that I would undergo, if he was scared that I would go away and not come back.

Chapter 2: Paris

I. Arrival

Paris does not anticipate your arrival.

This may be hard to fathom, but her breath does not quicken as you approach; she makes no sign that she has acknowledged your struggle to find your way into the city, to arrive. She turns an indifferent shoulder to you, as she has to countless visitors, immigrants, expatriates. You may stand in the street, agape, as she shakes back the long hair of her ornamentation and stands proudly – for she is a proud woman, Paris, and eager to display her beauty.

You are not the first to lose yourself in her streets, their languid twisting toward the Arc de Triomphe, delicate wrought-iron balconies clinging like spiders to creamy stone above. Paris does not invite you in; you must labor to enter and even begin to understand her.

I choose the St-Michel/Nôtre Dame stop because I remember getting off here with my family years ago. My bag feels like a dead body, and I struggle with it as I ascend to street level. The watery sun stings my travel weary eyes as I emerge, and there – just

there – is the crouching hulk of Nôtre Dame. I laugh at myself, knowing I look for all the world like the gaping American kid I am. I'm all wrong – my sneakers and dirty men's shorts, t-shirt and smudged makeup from my sleepless flight are not the impression I wanted to make on my first Parisian morning. The chain running from my wallet to my belt loop clinks as I head toward what I hope is a busy corner that will yield a taxi. The band of my engagement ring digs into my finger as I pull my bag.

II. Spent Shells of Celebration

My third day in Paris is Bastille Day, *La Fête Nationale*. I am navigating the *Métro* and the streets holding tightly to a brown paper bag full of clinking bottles of wine, making my way back to my dormitory in the 14th *arrondissement*. We're not supposed to bring wine into the dorm; the bar in the basement and the wine vending machines at the American University of Paris's on-campus cafeteria, a short *Métro* ride away, are supposed to assuage our cravings. But we're bending the rules tonight, all of us. We open one bottle in the room with a pocketknife – we have no glasses, no corkscrew. My roommate Nicole and I, along with our friends Jason and Maureen, drain the bottle. We pull one of the hotel-grade rough nylon quilts off a bed, pack up our remaining bottles, a deck of cards, and Nicole's cigarettes and walk the three blocks to Glacière. From there it is a short *Métro* ride to the Champ de Mars and the Eiffel Tower.

We emerge into a crush of people. I am momentarily stunned by the heat and the noise – then Jason elbows me and propels me forward. People are shouting, grabbing onto each other to keep from getting separated, jostling forward and nearly knocking me off my feet, and we haven't even left the *Métro* station yet. We finally escape to ground level and walk with the crowd toward the Tower. The Champ de Mars is teeming with every imaginable type of person. As we pick our way across the lawn in search of a clear patch of grass, we are surrounded by a swarm of languages: French, English, Spanish, and many others I can't identify combine into Babel. I am lost in the noise, the excitement, the fumes of the wine and cigarettes, spilled beer and piss.

We finally find an empty patch of grass and settle down to our cups and cards. Several rounds later, I watch a girl pick her way across the grass in an impossibly short skirt. She's followed by a young girl playing a battered violin, a man selling roses out of a metal pail, several people hawking beer out of buckets shedding condensation. I've lost interest in the card games, so I lie back on the blanket to wait for the Tower's hourly display and let my mind wander.

A resounding thud that sounds much too close to my head makes me jerk out of my reverie. I sit up. It looks like everyone else hasn't moved in hours.

“What the hell was that?” I ask, to no one in particular.

Nicole looks up from her cards and laughs at my frightened face. “A wine bottle.” She points to its remains, resting a foot or two from where my head had been.

The crowd has been throwing the carcasses of their spent wine bottles away in a strange and, I think, barbaric show of celebration. I laugh at myself, shaking off the rush of adrenaline, and pick up a cup. Mine? Probably not. Nobody cares.

Before the deep *thunk* of the wine bottle hitting dirt, I had been thinking about my mother. Her terror at my leaving home and traveling on my own was ill-disguised in the weeks leading up to my departure. It was still in evidence as I gathered my things from the security checkpoint in Philadelphia and turned around to wave one last time at my parents. My dad had his arm around my mom's shoulders. Her lips were tight as she smiled – mom-code for unhappiness. I'd been seeing that look a lot lately.

The absence of the constant arguments with my parents is part of the reason I'm enjoying my time here so thoroughly. I'm not under their surveillance so I can eat and drink what I want and go where I want. It's freedom, finally, although I miss Josh. Each day brings new experiences that I wish he were here to share. He's never been on a plane, so any romantic fantasies I harbor about him coming to Paris to surprise me are tempered by the knowledge that he has neither the finances nor the inclination to fly across an ocean, even if I'm waiting for him on the other side. I am alone here in more ways than one – I boarded the plane in Philadelphia headed toward a strange city where they speak a strange language, not knowing a single person. But I'm also the only one of my new group of friends who is in a relationship, the only one tethered by a commitment that's marked by the ring on my finger.

I had planned to spend a great deal of my time in Paris by myself – I pictured myself wandering through museums alone, eating alone and writing in my journal, finding my own café and whiling away the hours in between classes with a *café crème* and my journal and pen. I wanted to record every moment of my time here, but I am finding that it's impossible. I have a special journal for the trip, as I do on most trips I take. I like to have a capsule of each trip for when I get home.

I'm an art history major, but I don't draw or paint – I write. I've always kept journals, and it's a relief to find that I can write freely here. Somewhere around six months ago Mom read my journal and figured out that Josh had been married before – a fact I had chosen not to share, considering the tension my relationship with Josh causes at home. I was furious with mom, at her blatant breach of trust. I stopped writing in my journal after that, until now.

In truth I do spend a lot of my daytime hours alone since I'm the only art student among my friends, but I spend all of my evening hours with this disparate crowd. Nicole and her best friend Jason, traveling together; Maureen, whose family just moved to Paris from New Jersey, renting a sparse but quintessentially Parisian apartment behind Trocadéro; Paige from Manhattan, who wears her designer clothes and snobbery like second skin; Philippe, the half-French student Nicole knows from home, striking in a matinee-idol way. Philippe and Jason aren't students at AUP like the rest of us, but they're our age and their connections to Nicole mean they're not really strangers. A socialite from Manhattan, an Ohio suburban girl and her best friend, a half-French

Adonis, a blonde Jersey girl, and me, the punk girl from Philly, ranged in a rough circle around the spent shells of wine bottles. Nicole is shuffling the sticky cards with a long trail of ash hanging onto her cigarette. I keep watching it, waiting for it to fall. When it does it lands in her drink, and she cusses in French and English. Philippe's laugh rumbles around in his chest for a while before it emerges. He keeps shaking back his dark, curly hair and letting Paige catch him looking at her. I scoot closer to Nicole, snag a cigarette from her pack, and she deals me into the hand.

We can't get home. Thousands of people are milling around the *Métro* station, waiting in vain. The *Métro* is closed – one of the trains struck a girl and killed her. Apparently she jumped. We make the long walk to the next *Métro* station with a crowd of other people, find a different line and try our luck there. Two days later I am late for class, this time because a girl was pushed onto the tracks. I sit on the raised platform at Glacière and eat my *pain au chocolat*. I'm surprised that the city seems to be paralyzed by these accidents. At home I ride the train back and forth to school every day, and while there are accidents and I've been late for school more than once, accidents don't seem to have the same effect on the rail system in Philadelphia. I finish my breakfast and take a sip of water from the huge square plastic bottle of water I bought because the weather is so hot and nothing is air conditioned. The label features a long-haired, loincloth-clad, monkey-like yet chiseled caveman running from an erupting volcano. It's utterly ridiculous, but I keep buying that same brand because it makes me laugh.

III. Negative Space

Philippe knows of a club on the Champs Élysées. That's all the advertisement we need. Inside is all red velvet curtains and tiny tables, a gigantic oak bar and a fantastically handsome bartender. It's supposed to be a Latin bar, but they're playing mostly American rap and hip hop with the occasional Latin song thrown in. Downstairs is more of the same, with a small courtyard that is no relief from the heat inside; even the courtyard is so crowded you can hardly move. Nicole dolled me up in a pair of jeans and a black halter top. I'm uncomfortable, used to wearing oversized pants and not showing this much skin, but I admit I fit in here – leaving my punk wardrobe at home means I blend in when I usually make myself stand out on purpose. Nicole and I move toward the windows, trying to get a breath of air, but when I turn around to say something, she's not there. My heart pounds in my chest once, twice, before I see her – talking to three men seated at one of the tiny tables. As I make my way back to her, one of the men rises and reaches out for my hand. My hand reaches out automatically. I see Nicole raise her eyebrow at me as the man pulls me onto the dance floor. We dance for a moment to a Latin song, but it ends and melds into an American rap song. He pulls me closer.

Dancing, I am finding, has become a dicey proposition. I am constantly aware of the relationship of my body to his, my eyes constantly measuring the space between us wondering, "Is it enough?" I can't hear over the music to ask the man's name. As one song merges into another, he puts his hand on the small of my back and pulls me closer to

him. My internal alarm bells are ringing – too close, much too close. I can feel his hands on me, his breath on my face. He’s been drinking.

I make my escape after letting him buy me a drink and make my way downstairs. Nicole has found her mark for the night, one of the lanky Frenchmen from the table. She reminds me a little bit of how I used to be before Josh, enjoying and encouraging the attention she’s getting from the guys we meet. She’s pouring it on tonight; she and her new friend are pushed up against a black couch. Nicole’s tossing her hair as she talks to him. I wave to her and push my way outside, taking in huge gulps of the hot night air. It hovered near one hundred degrees today, but I am wearing long pants to cover up the matrix of tiny red dots covering my legs – heat rash. The air isn’t moving out here any more than inside and it certainly doesn’t feel any cooler at midnight than it did this afternoon. I lean against the wall; at least the stone feels cool on my bare back. We’ve got a pact, all of us – none of us leave that evening’s club or bar without the entire group, so I know Nicole won’t disappear without at least telling me she’s going. After a while I realize I’m not going to be able to cool off, so I go back inside and eventually find Nicole plastered against Arnaud on the couch, despite the heat. Philippe is sitting somewhat awkwardly next to them. I roll my eyes at Philippe and he smiles back.

IV: Prince Charming

The name of the bar is the Frog Prince or the Frog and Princess, something like that. It's supposedly the official bar for this semester's AUP kids, at least according to the student advisors, but we've never been. Five minutes inside is enough for me – it's dark and sticky with wood paneling the same color as the tables and just as dirty. They have a computer hooked up to the sound system playing awful American music and €4 pitchers of terrible beer. It's a transplanted frat party. Nicole, Maureen and I find a booth and order a pitcher of beer. It's warm.

I remember his voice – low, smooth – and his accent – Australian. I look up – he's about six feet tall, thin with dark hair and blue eyes. I laugh when I see him. It's as though he's stepped out of my brain, the realization of my adolescent “ideal” man now standing in a dingy bar and looking down at me through thick eyelashes. *Not good*, I think to myself. He asks if he can buy me a drink. He's bought me three by the time we make our way to the dance floor.

This time, the alarm bells are harder to hear. I tell him I'm engaged. He looks for a long time at my engagement ring in the dark room. Then he takes my hand, drapes it around his neck and pulls me close to dance again. I laugh. He leads me by the hand to the bar where Nicole is standing, waiting to order more drinks. She raises her eyebrow at me again, in real surprise this time, when she sees my hand in his. Hours later we're still on the dance floor.

“Come with me,” he says, his lips close to my ear.

“Where?”

“Doesn’t matter. Just come with me.” His eyes are pleading.

I slouch down on the bench and turn my face in toward Nicole’s shoulder. We’re hiding ourselves in the darkness underneath a tree a block from the Frog and Princess. *He asked me to go with him*, I think. I stood on the dance floor, sweaty hair stuck to my face, ears ringing, cheeks numb with alcohol and adrenaline, and almost said yes. Now he’s looking for me, stumbling drunkenly down the street with his friends. I turn my face away as they pass. I can hear him saying, “She’s here! I know she’s here somewhere!” and I’m surprised by how much I want to get up and follow him. Nicole watches me as I watch him cross the street. I almost get up a hundred times. Then they turn the corner and disappear from sight. We’re safe now. Or rather, I’m safe now. By the time I climb in bed, I’ve almost convinced myself it didn’t happen.

V. Les Bains

A few weeks later, maybe a month, we’re sitting in Maureen’s family’s apartment, the long windows open even though no breeze is blowing. We’re watching some French soap opera on TV.

“I heard about this club.” Maureen mentions, in that slightly stilted off-hand manner that suggests this wasn’t off-hand at all. “It’s in this old bathhouse. We should check it out.” So we spend an afternoon getting ready and then stand in a huge crowd waiting to get into Les Bains.

The entirety of the place is tiled, with steps and sunken areas that once served as baths now gathering dancers in quarantine. There are fountains in the walls, and men and women dance on large boxes or platforms that are raised above the crowd. They must be hired, because although anyone can climb up on the boxes to dance, the people stationed up there now are fantastically beautiful and impossibly good dancers. The acoustics of an all-tile interior create a reverberating, throbbing feeling in our chests.

The six of us spend well over €100 on a gigantic bottle of vodka, at least a gallon, plus cranberry juice and other mixers so that we can sit in the VIP section and not have to deal with the crowd. We get up in twos or threes to dance, always returning to the table after a few songs to refresh our drinks and rest our feet. We’ve been there a few hours when I rescue Paige from an overzealous Italian man and we return to our table to find Nicole flanked by two French guys. They have taken our seats (and, it appears, some of our vodka). Nicole looks like she’s enjoying the attention, so we scoot in next to them and introduce ourselves.

Les Bains is open until six AM. Paige and I decide to leave somewhere between 3 and 4 AM, having drained the vodka and gotten hungry. Nicole is off dancing with one or both of the French guys, and Maureen and her sister want to stay. Under normal

circumstances or normal intoxication we'd never ignore our rule and leave without the whole group, but we're both too drunk to think clearly and leave by ourselves. We're in an unfamiliar *arrondissement*, so we walk the streets in uncomfortable shoes looking for a *boulangerie* or restaurant that's open. Once out in the open air, we realize just how fuzzy our heads are. Walking will help sober us up, we reason as we make our way. A few blocks up the street we see lights on in a bakery and walk on wobbly legs toward it. As we walk, a black car pulls up beside us. I think they're coming from the direction of the club. A man rolls down the passenger window and begins yelling at us in French, catcalling and spouting all the foul things he'd like to do to us. I catch about every third word, but I can tell what they're saying. Paige turns and begins yelling back in equally vulgar though broken French, and I resort to the distillation of distasteful American sentiment – I give them the finger. They yell “Fuck you!” in English this time, and drive off.

We laugh it off and step into the open bakery we'd been headed for. There's a sizeable line inside already, despite the hour. Paige and I take our place at the rear of the queue and have what I can only assume, judging by the way my ears are ringing after the music in the club, is a loud conversation about what we're going to order. The room is tiny, dominated by a large display case holding today's breads and pastries. The walls are a creamy green, the ceiling low. I'm debating between *pain au chocolat* and a plain croissant when I realize that the sudden increase in noise in the tiny bakery is directed at me. I turn around and find myself face-to-ear with a very tall man, his two friends

behind him. He's wearing a black shirt and positively screaming at me. He puts his finger in my face and begins yelling about how I had disrespected him by flipping him the bird. He repeats "fuck you, fuck you, fuck you" over and over again until even my alcohol-riddled brain wonders if they're the only English words he knows. If we were in the States I think the owner or a worker in the bakery would step in and tell the guys (or all of us) to leave, but as it was, the proprietor and all the customers just turn and watch us.

While all of this is going through my head, I still have Tall Man's finger in my face and a silent and shell-shocked Paige by my side. I endure about fifty "fuck yous" before I reach up and hit his hand out of my face.

"You get your fucking hand out of my face," I say in English. Alcohol and anger have slowed my brain; I can't speak in French.

"Non, non," tall man says, putting his finger right back where it was. "Fuck you."

"I'm telling you right now to get your fucking hand out of my fucking face." I lean back to look up in his face as I say this, which enrages him further. He pulls his hand back and for a second I think, *finally he'll leave*, until I realize that he pulled his hand away to form a fist, and is now standing in the attitude of a fighter. He's looking at me furiously, arm cocked and ready to fly. His friends are standing nervously by his sides, looking at him and at each other while all of this is going on. I close my eyes for a fraction of a second, waiting for the blow, but his friends grab him before he can swing.

The alcohol in my system keeps the fear from surfacing. I look at him, fighting against his friends, and laugh.

“Non, fuck you. You wouldn’t hit a girl.” I say. Paige, silent this whole time, laughs. Through the whole confrontation, the owner and customers of the *boulangerie* stand silent.

“Come on Paige, let’s go.” As we turn to walk past the tall man and his friends, who are still restraining him, he spits. It hits me on the forehead. I stand, stunned, for what seems like an eternity. It is silent in the tiny room. I reach up and wipe the spit off my forehead. I leave without another word, Paige following behind.

When we reach the sidewalk, Paige links her arm through mine in our typical fashion. Neither of us says anything. We walk another few blocks and spot a pizza place that’s open. Not even consulting one another, we head straight for it.

Only when we are inside and safely seated at a table do we say anything to one another. Paige’s first words are, “Did that really just happen?” We laugh the slightly hysterical laughs of people recovering from a rush of adrenaline and eat our meal in silence. Later I write about the evening in my journal, as though the whole episode happened to someone else, as though it’s funny instead of terrifying. I’m not good at admitting when I’ve put myself in danger. I walked away, so I recast the whole episode in my mind as proof of my punk attitude coming in handy. It takes me a long time to realize that it was punk attitude that got me in trouble in the first place.

VI: Like Church to Me

I haven't talked to Josh in a few days. We've been emailing, but phone access is tricky and has to be carefully timed. The payphones in the dorm take phone cards embedded with smart chips which are sold at the *Tabac* down the street. I rip the cellophane off a fresh card and jam it into the phone, dialing the numbers quickly. Country code, area code, seven digits to hear his voice. It's a little after 4 PM in Paris, 10 AM at home. I'm continually doing the math – home is six hours behind. He doesn't answer. I leave a message, telling him I miss him, and to call me, and that I sent him an email. Then I go downstairs to join Nicole and Jason.

The soaring Tour Eiffel is alight again. It must be 11:00. No, midnight. I can't tell. I turn my head to the right to see Jason staring at the tower, to the left to see that Nicole's eyes have drifted shut. We've been here hours, drinking wine and eating baguette and soft cheese, talking. It's just now starting to cool off. We heard today that one of Marie Antoinette's oak trees at Versailles died from the heat. The city has set up makeshift morgues that are cooled to keep the dead, many of them elderly. Numbers of the dead keep rising – we hear 8,000, then 9,000. My heat rash is back or never left, but I've given up the vanity of long pants and my punkish wardrobe and taken to wearing skirts every day. Jason ordered everyone shots of tequila at the bar this evening – it arrived at our table roughly the temperature of bathwater. Even beer, refreshing at first, is hot by the time it's half gone.

I sit up slowly, shaking my head to clear it of the cobwebs produced by rich food and cheap wine. My back and neck are stiff from lying on the hard ground.

“What time is it?” Nicole asks, sleepily.

“Midnight, I think.”

“Want to go back to the dorm bar?” Jason asks. Nicole and I nod. The dorm bar has the cheapest beer in town. We gather the scratchy quilt and head to the *Métro*.

The shrill ring of the phone in our room makes me jump out of my skin. I open one eye in time to see Nicole stagger out of bed and knock the phone from its cradle just to shut it up. She lifts it to her ear.

“It’s for you,” she grumbles.

“Sorry, Nicole” I whisper, and crawl out of bed to reach for the phone. It’s 9 AM in Paris, 3 AM at home. We’ve been asleep for almost 4 hours.

“Hello?” I know it’s Josh. I can hear his broken breathing on the line. He’s crying.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“What? Josh, what are you talking about?”

“You don’t care about me. You just want to go out and get drunk. I don’t know what you’re thinking anymore.” He’s sobbing harder now. I’m trying in vain to think of a comeback, but my brain is still struggling to wake up.

“Josh... of course I care about you! Why are you saying that?”

“You’re not acting like you love me.”

“You know I love you. Why would you say that?” I wonder if he’s even been asleep, or if he’s been plotting this conversation in his head for hours. He sounds hysterical.

“The email you sent –” he sputters. *Merde*, I think. I thought it would amuse him to hear about how his punk fiancée stood up to a huge French guy. I’ve gotten in scraps before at shows and they always seem to amuse him. Now nervousness squirms in the pit of my stomach like a snake. Josh is still crying, still pleading with me.

“You’re not acting right. You don’t care anymore. You’re hanging out with all kinds of people, wrong people. You’re out of control. You’re acting like a fucking whore.”

The anger surges through me instantly – anger at Josh, at myself, at my parents, at being thousands of miles away and feeling the need to explain myself. I’ve been gone for five weeks and Josh hasn’t been handling it well. I can hear the edge in his voice when we talk, and although his emails and comments to me seem upbeat, I can read the undercurrent of depression and strain in his words. He put on a brave face until tonight.

I knew he was struggling, I knew the brave face was an act, but I am still taken aback by his anger. I haven't done anything different from what I would do at home. And I've been careful, hanging out with other students, not random people, which I've told Josh what feels like a thousand times. I haven't even been dancing with guys, really, except for the Australian – who was conveniently omitted from my emails. I know I'm not acting like a whore; I'm being careful, trying not to lead people on, and letting them know where I stand before things get too heated. *Damn it, why am I crying? I have nothing to be ashamed of.*

“I'm not acting like a whore. I don't even know why you're saying that. I haven't done anything wrong.” My words sound strangled as I push them out around the lump in my throat. Josh is still sobbing. I have heard him cry this way before, with shattered sobs that threaten to break his thin frame. We were sitting in the back of his mother's van while his sister's piano recital went on inside. He'd just had another fight with my dad – without telling me, Josh had invested in what amounted to a pyramid scheme company. While he saw it as the perfect way to make extra money to help support us, Dad knew it was a scam. I knew Dad was right, but felt like I ought to be loyal to Josh. That day Josh laid his head in my lap and sobbed about the unfairness of my dad's refusal to join, the pressure that was on him to support us, and the constant refrain that my parents didn't like him. I held him, telling him everything was going to be fine. Now, I'm not so sure.

Why did I have to tell him about the guy at the bakery, I think. I can't believe my own stupidity at relating that story via email rather than in person. At least in person he could see me laugh, play it off as no big deal. Damn it, I'm such a dumbass.

I'm even more furious with myself when I realize that now I've started crying, I can't seem to stop. I finally hang up the phone with a terse "I'll call you later." Nicole has gotten up and taken a shower to give me some privacy. I dress quietly and leave the room before she comes out.

My hands are shaking as I feed my *Métro* ticket into the machine. I drop it twice before it finally fits into the tiny slot and lets me through the turnstile. I don't have class for another three hours so I head to the Louvre, even though I know it'll be crowded. I could go tonight – the museum is open for extended hours on Wednesday nights, a fact they don't really advertise, so the galleries tend to be quieter and the access to artwork more immediate than usual. But I need to think, need to relax. The European sculpture garden is waiting for me; its light muted, filtering through a glass roof and sliding off the marble figures. I sit on a bench that's a little bit removed from my favorite piece – Antonio Canova's *Cupid and Psyche*. Actually there are two sculptures here by that name, both by Canova. They stand adjacent to each other in the gallery. The earlier group features an adolescent Cupid standing with a more mature-looking Psyche. He has his arm reaching up around her neck, and their opposite hands are toying with a butterfly – Psyche's artistic attribute. They are both standing in *contrapposto* stance, weight on one leg and bodies forming a languid S. But it's the later group that interests me – in it

Canova has captured Cupid's reawakening of Psyche from her mortal sleep. This group is recumbent, Cupid's fingers twined in Psyche's hair as he lifts her face to his. It could be the moment after she awakens or the moment before – the passion of this moment takes my breath away. I breathe the dusty, slightly stale air of the museum, watch the dust motes swirling in the light, hear the calls of the schoolchildren on holiday. Finally I feel my heart slow down. This place is like church for me – this air has been consecrated and the light blessed.

I sit there for at least an hour, thinking. My journal is in my bag, but I don't write. I'm still too angry to be able to write clearly. The anger leaves, slowly. I eventually rouse myself and head back to the *Métro* and to my class, actually meeting in a building today on the AUP campus. My teacher is French, was interviewed in French, and speaks exceedingly broken English. Her lectures, with her reading from a three-ring binder, changing the slides with a quiet *chink* of the slide projector, are torturous. At least the room is dark and nobody can see the tears that spill over onto my cheeks as soon as the first slide hits the screen.

VII: Our Lady, My Lady

I decide to go by Nôtre Dame on my way home from the AUP campus. I ride back to the St-Michel/Notre Dame stop and make my way across the quay to the church. The ceiling inside is painted a deep blue with gold stars – a piece of heaven on earth. I

haven't been to church since I came here, other than for class. For someone who goes to church every week, it's strange to go so long between services. Today I choose a rickety wooden chair off to the side of the transept and sit. Suddenly the organ blasts forth – my uncle played that organ once, before I was born, while touring with one of the choirs he directed. The sound crashes through the open space and overwhelms my thoughts. A young sister with a stylish dark bob stands at the altar, singing the Latin mass into a microphone. I don't know the responses, don't know when to sit or stand, yet I stay. The ritual is soothing. I spend most of my time praying. Not any specific prayer, more like one word – *please* – repeated over and over. After my prayers are exhausted and the service ends, I find myself near a bank of candles, illuminating a picture of the Virgin Mother. The icon is beautifully detailed. I have studied many icons of the Virgin Mother, but I have never worshipped her. Now I pay a Euro and light a candle – I suppose it's for me, although I don't really know.

VIII: Trying

It's been three days since my fight with Josh, and I haven't called him. I stand in front of the dirty payphone in the dorm and think through the digits in my head, but don't dial. I don't want to talk to him – although the anger has left, I am still holding the pain he inflicted on me close to my chest, keeping it close by, checking on it often. I haven't gone out with Nicole and the rest of my friends for a few nights. Instead I've been

spending my evenings at a tiny, sticky table at the dorm bar, drinking Coke and writing – trying to write.

I try to write about the fight with Josh, about the day at the Louvre and the feeling of peace that I felt in the sculpture gallery, short-lived though it was. There are words in my head, but they're more of a buzz in the back of my mind than coherent thought. As soon as I try to grasp them, capture them on the page, they slip away. Because of this, my writing sessions are few and far between. It's hard to make myself sit down and write when I can't hold onto the words. I sit there with the journal open in front of me, the creamy pages inviting, but I can't bring myself to touch pen to paper. I feel like I ought to have a lot to say, that the words should flow like they usually do, and that at the end of an evening I will have figured out what's going on in my head, but the words I'm after stay hidden under a series of trite observations about the city, my classes, and my friends. Eventually, I put my journal and pen in my bag and walk to the pizzeria at the end of the street. The proprietor knows me; we've been coming here so often. He waves me to a table.

“Where are your friends tonight?” he says, in a deep, rich voice.

“They're out somewhere. Causing trouble.” I say, and he laughs. He brings me a small glass filled with a potent pink liquid, some sort of *apéritif*, and then later, a Coke and a *Croque Monsieur* – a glorified grilled ham and cheese sandwich dripping with cheese and coated in more cheese or *béchamel* – creamy white sauce. It's pure comfort food. I eat slowly and walk back toward the dorm, the walls of the asylum, l'Hôpital St-

Anne, high and imposing beside me. St-Anne has quite the colorful reputation in the city, and when we give our address to taxi drivers we often get raised eyebrows, as though the drivers are trying to determine whether we're residents of St-Anne or harmless students who just happen to live on Rue Cabanis.

I've been thinking about St-Anne during dinner, trying to sift through my mind and find what it is that I need to write. I've always needed to write things out to think them over. A series of images keep rising above the buzz in my head, and I keep turning them over and over. The tiny flame of the candle I lit in Nôtre Dame, the guy in the bakery being held back by his friends, the light hitting the Canova sculptures, the Australian stumbling down the street. Flame. Bakery. Sculptures. Australian.

It's the Australian that bothers me most, I think. While my efforts to think of that night as a dream or a figment of my overactive imagination worked for a bit, the implications of the evening are starting to settle, and I'm finding things I don't want to think about in the sediment. I feel like I need to unburden myself, confess how strong my attraction was and how hard I fought the desire to follow him, but there's no one to tell. My friends here would laugh it off, and my friends at home would think I'm exaggerating. Telling Josh would be cruel – he's already fragile enough; I can't add my guilt to the load he carries. I know following him would have been a stupid thing to do, but I find myself dangerously close to regretting making the smart decision.

Several days pass like this, my mind warring with itself. I stand in galleries with my classes; give a presentation on a Monet painting of Rouen Cathedral, but my voice is

distant and distracted. I drop my notes halfway through and struggle awkwardly to pick them up off the parquet floor. I call Josh when I get back to the dorm, irritated at myself for my poor showing, but his words are clipped and it's clear that his sympathy is limited. He says he's sorry, but remorse hasn't made it to his voice yet. Nights are no better – my one-word prayer from Nôtre Dame has followed me from the cathedral like a shadow, and I can't fall asleep at night without praying *please, please, please*. It takes me a few days to add up what is going on in my head. It's as though my mind has been solving the problem while I've been asleep. I didn't come to this understanding consciously; I wake up today and know I have to break up with Josh. I don't write it because to write it is to make it permanent. I turn the idea over and over in my head, examining it as I would a sculpture – from every possible angle.

I try not to think it, but the words escape into my mind, twisting in front of my vision as I squirm away from them. I have to do this. I have to break up with Josh. I can't take care of him for the rest of my life. He needs someone to mother him, in a way, and I finally realized I don't want to do that. I don't fit into the world he lives in anymore. Is there any way around it? I hate the thought of breaking his heart. I don't know how he'd recover from this, if ever. But no matter which view I take, I don't see another way out. I hate myself for even thinking it, but I'm relieved.

IX: Rome

I sit nervously in the hard plastic seat of the *Métro*, shuttling toward Charles De Gaulle airport. My mom's flight arrives in half an hour. I know I need to be there when she gets off the plane; otherwise she's going to panic. Mom's not a comfortable traveler, and I'm not sure what to expect. Two months ago, the thought of spending a week in Rome with mom made me extremely nervous. We haven't had a normal conversation in a year and a half – a conversation that doesn't revolve around the current color of my hair, my parents' obstinately closed-minded attitude about Josh, or my obstinate attitude about Josh.

My whole family has been drawn into the fray. By making the choice to be with Josh I have alienated my mother and disappointed my father. I will never forget the disappointment on my father's face when we all faced each other after the ill-conceived engagement. My brother's decision to be neutral has meant that he absorbs far more of the brunt of my parents' frustration than he ought, especially because I'm gone most weekends at Josh's house. My sister lives hours away and is busy with her own life, but never lets an opportunity pass to express her disapproval. I have effectively exiled myself from my family, although they are fighting it tooth and nail and if I'm honest with myself, I am too. Could I truly choose a man over my family? Perhaps, but if I'm honest with myself, that man would not be Josh.

I pick at my black tank top as I stand near the terminal exit, waiting. I have my purse slung over my body, the strap covered with pins from my favorite bands. It digs

into my chest as Mom hugs me tightly. I'm happy to see her – happier than I thought I'd be. The nervousness is gone.

“Your hair looks blonder,” she says. I shrug.

“I've been outside a lot.” We head toward baggage claim.

Mom heaves her suitcase off the carousel and stands wide-eyed as I get two *Métro* tickets from the agent.

“How did you figure out how to do all of this yourself?” she asks, as we board the *Métro* and head back toward Rue Cabanis. I say *excusez moi* to half the car as she wrestles with her suitcase and runs over countless toes.

“I don't know. I just asked for a ticket. I didn't really know where I was going. I figured I could find a cab somewhere once I got into the city,” I say. It's true – I had no plan on the day I showed up here. I tell Mom how I stumbled through the exercise of obtaining a *Métro* ticket, how the ticket agent at Charles De Gaulle rolled her eyes at my pronunciation and my sneakers, how I wrestled my bag onto the *Métro* car without any idea where it was taking me, other than toward Paris. She laughs when I tell her why I chose the St-Michel/Nôtre Dame stop, and about handing the piece of paper on which I'd written the address of my hotel to the taxi driver so I didn't have to worry about my French. By the end of the second day I'd had to figure out the *Métro* system and how to get from the dorm to my classes, although I had Nicole and her far more comprehensive grasp of French to help me along.

We drop mom's bags off at the dorm and I take her to the pizzeria. The owner waves us in and brings two glasses of *apéritif* even though it's only about 10:30 in the morning. I drink mine. Mom takes a tiny sip of hers, makes a face, and then makes another face as I drink hers, too. We eat and then board the *Métro* again, and head toward Nôtre Dame. We walk the lawn around the cathedral as I give Mom an ambulatory art history lesson. The flying buttresses soar overhead as I point out the copper statues of saints on the lower roof level. I tell Mom I heard in one of my classes that the sculptor responsible for those statues sculpted his own face onto one of the saints, and we laugh. This is natural, finally, after a year of almost continual conflict. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Later that night we board a train and head toward Rome. The sleeper car is stuffy, so we open the window and hear the countries whooshing by. We stop in Lausanne, Switzerland, and I crane my neck to get a view of the country beyond the platform, but it's too dark and we're moving again before I can get my bearings. I read while Mom sleeps somewhat fitfully from the heat and the jet lag. I am dozing when I hear the call for Milan, too tired to sit up and try to get a look outside. We finally collapse into bed in our tiny hotel after nearly fourteen hours on the train – my first air-conditioned accommodations after two months of unbearable heat. I find myself waking, shivering, my body unable to handle the temperature.

The next morning we head toward Vatican City. Traveling with my mom is very different from traveling alone; Mom doesn't like public transportation, even in major

U.S. cities. We take taxis everywhere. I roll my eyes but pick my battles. Mom keeps telling me I need to be a tour guide – my art history major actually comes in handy here. We laugh when we realize there is a small pack of American tourists following behind us through St. Peter's, listening to my impromptu lecture. It happens all over Rome – we find ourselves being trailed, and eventually people start asking me questions. At least we can bypass the tour guides outside looking to make a quick buck off clueless American tourists.

We ride a regional train to Florence one day and walk the narrow streets of the city, stopping in shops and churches along the way – lots of churches. Church architecture and art has become a *de facto* concentration within my art history major, so I am able to articulate the changes in architecture between France and Italy, between this church and that, and point out the various saints and patrons in the altarpieces by their attributes. There's a profusion of Medicis in the artwork here, cardinals and bishops, and socially ambitious Italian citizens. I tell Mom you can pick out St. Peter because he's pictured holding the keys to heaven, that John the Baptist is usually dressed in skins and carrying a crude cross, that martyrs carry palm fronds. We study maps and plan our routes, pick out the churches we want to see. There's a peace about this time that has been missing from our lives for so long I almost forgot what it felt like. I don't want to upset things and it's obvious Mom doesn't either, so we engage in a careful dance of avoidance.

We spend a week in Italy together and never mention Josh.

X: Fallibility

Lying in my bed at my parents' house, staring at the same wall I've stared at nearly every night for twenty years, I repeat the word. *Please. Please. Please.* There's no answer.

Two weeks after I get home, I drive the two hours to Josh's house. When I step out of my car in his driveway, I instantly think, *this is not right, I should not be here*, but I hitch on a smile and climb out of the car into his arms. I fight the whole weekend to be normal, goofing off and sitting in our favorite diner with our friends, but I feel unavoidably different. Josh's silly, childish antics that used to make me laugh now grate on me and I find myself getting irritable with him. Until Paris I always wished for one more day, one more minute with Josh, but when it's time to go I'm actually relieved to get in the car and drive home.

That was three weeks ago. I've been debating the right way to tell my parents since I got home. I am standing in the kitchen when I tell Mom. I've known for weeks now, ever since that day in the dorm. Finally I say it aloud.

"I think I need to break up with Josh." I wait for the "I told you so" or the "Why did it take you so long to realize?" Nothing. Mom looks more relieved than surprised. She knew what I was going to say before I even said it. She could see the changes in me.

I wear my engagement ring until Mom and I drive to Josh's house. Standing in Josh's living room, I take it off and put it in its black velvet box. I set the box on the

table between me and a horrified and shattered Josh. When there is nothing else to say, I push the storm door open and leave him lying on the couch. Mom has been waiting anxiously for me at the nearby mall. She has a pink rose in her hand when I pick her up. We have a two-hour drive back home.

Why Paris? Why not Madrid? London? Seemingly any big city in the world could do the trick, get me away from Josh, but I knew it had to be Paris. That's why I had torn the poster about the study abroad program off the wall at Temple and carried it home to my mom. I have my own mythology about the Parisian experience: Paris is Vogue and Christian Dior – my love of fashion and design persists despite my current wardrobe. Paris is Sabrina cracking the code of French sophistication and returning to America nearly unrecognizable. Paris is waking up in the morning and deciding who to be that day. Paris is Art Deco *Métro* signs, strong coffee, stronger liquor. Paris is writers sitting in cafés with nicotine-stained fingers scratching out words. And for me, Paris is autonomy, understanding my own capability and navigating the world on my own.

I went Paris to experience the height of sophistication – afternoons at the Louvre, evenings in the Latin Quarter, unhurried morning coffee in a sidewalk café. Although I did all these things, I did not experience the effects I expected. My road to sophistication was far less of an outward change than I had anticipated. I didn't cut my hair or buy a new wardrobe. Sophistication, I realized, meant being comfortable by myself, realizing who I am and not being afraid of it. Being sophisticated really meant growing up. I

owned up to my uncertainty, arrogance, and fear, and came home feeling as though I had figured out how to live comfortably in my own skin. Paris made me realize how much of myself I would have had to give up to be with Josh – my continual drive to expand my horizons wouldn't fit well with Josh's homebody instincts and my desire to go back to school would be tricky living in central Pennsylvania – the choices for programs would be slim at best. To be with Josh, I would be confining myself to the world I'd been living in for the past year and a half, and I realized it didn't fit me anymore.

Seven years later, I flip through pictures from Paris, from my time with Josh. It feels like looking at someone else's life. I recognize myself in these pictures, remember these moments, but Josh is a stranger. He's always just slightly disengaged from the camera, part of his own orbit. He had manufactured a persona that encompassed him and everything he touched. He became a caricature. He was always like that, as though he inhabited a separate world, a giant playground of sorts, where everything was brightly colored and fun, where he could be a kid all the time, like Neverland. I could visit that world, I could play there, but I couldn't live there.

Chapter 3: Paris as Place

What is it about Paris that draws people, especially Americans, to her bosom? There is a uniquely American idea of Paris, a mystique that has lasted through generations and continues to draw Americans to her, even now. In his introduction to *Americans in Paris: a Literary Anthology*, Adam Gopnik likens the choices of the American sojourner in Paris as coming for the food – the creature comforts and transcendent beauty of the city, lunch in the Tuileries and evening at the Louvre, or coming for the drink – new and titillating experiences and literal drink alike. “It is, of course, one of the truths of this history that the two kinds of visitors often end up swapping roles and tastes, like visitors to two sides of one buffet. The people who come for the drinks stay for the dinner, and the people who come for the dinner are often the ones who go home drunk” (Gopnik xv).

I began my own journey to Paris with food in mind and a steady diet of art and church architecture on my menu, but by my third day in France I found myself standing on the opposite side of the buffet table, clutching my wine glass. I saw the art I came for, stood in the hushed churches, but Paris knew what I did not – that I needed the drink. I want to explore here what it is about Paris that changes people, brings them out of themselves and allows them to find a new sense of freedom in their own skin. Examining the writings of Americans in Paris, from the Lost Generation to my own reflections upon

my time in the city, I will consider the importance of place in nonfiction writing and the ways in which the construction of place affects one's experience of nonfiction writing.

Paris has been depicted as elusive, behaving much like an attractive but aloof woman, "approachable but unobtainable, to be wooed but possibly never won" (Gopnik xx), as an island of purity in an otherwise putrid political and artistic climate, and as previously mentioned, a feast for the eyes and mouths. The political climate in the United States during the inter-war years was considered oppressive and antiquated. Hundreds of artists and political malcontents found refuge in the neighborhoods of Paris, taking advantage of low travel costs and a favorable exchange rate. The café culture of Paris encouraged the spread of new artistic and political ideas, and many of the Americans living in Paris explored new political and artistic schools of thought. The exchange of ideas encouraged by the collaborative nature of the café culture created a ready community for artists and writers eager to partake in *la vie bohème*.

In *Paris Was Our Mistress*, Samuel Putnam writes:

This is not, then, just another book about Paris.... This is, rather, a book about a generation *in Paris*. That it would have been the same generation anywhere else is inconceivable; for the city by the Seine inevitably colored its life and work and shaped its destiny. Paris always does that. There is no such thing as a Paris that everyone knows, that may be captured and put into a guidebook or a volume of whimsical reminiscences,

for the benefit of the tourist or curiosity-seeker. It is always *somebody's Paris*. It always has been and always will be. (6-7)

Paris, then, is eternally personal, and the city cannot be divorced from the work and output of the Lost Generation. Putnam regards writing about Paris as an intensely personal exercise, the recollection of the “formative period” of his life, his youth and that of an entire generation. Writing about formative periods in one’s life forms much of the skeleton upon which memoir is built, the capturing of a “steadily changing idea of the emergent self... [clarifying] one’s own formative experience” (Gornick 117). Because the self is continually changing and we are continually growing, we amass a certain amount of wisdom about our experiences. In Putnam’s case as in mine, the passage of time and the application of present wisdom to past events affects the ways in which one writes about Paris – wisdom helps one to understand the great changes that Paris can provoke, but the application of this wisdom to writing about the past may dampen the sparks of spontaneity and in many cases youthful inexperience that are necessary to the telling of not just Parisian stories, but any stories about maturation and change (Putnam 7).

In order to write effectively about Paris one must obtain a carefully cultivated distance from it. “Maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris, as in Paris I could write about Michigan. I did not know it was too early for that because I did not know Paris well enough,” Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast* (7). What he is trying to understand about the experience of writing about Paris is that a balancing act must be

performed: the writer must simultaneously destroy the distance, both geographically and emotionally, that stands in the way of writing about Paris, while also being aware of the ways in which their experiences changed them. Distance from Paris allows writers to incorporate the changes that the Parisian experience spurred in them, but in order to write about the experience they must strip off the changes and start from the beginning, all the while remaining cognizant of where they ended up. I found this negotiation to be a delicate and occasionally maddening balance, requiring constant evaluation of my writing in order to strike the intended tone. I am radically different now from what I was during my summer in Paris, but stripping off the changes and going back to who I was then was necessary to create a real and vibrant story of my time there.

Despite the ongoing march of time and its value for maintaining perspective, it is important to write about Paris in a way that recaptures the feeling of walking the streets, to greet the reconstructed sights of the city as though seeing them for the first time. Hemingway drops the reader into the experience from the first word, “then.” “Then there was the bad weather,” he writes, leaving the reader wondering which words filled in the narrative in the author’s mind before that first printed word, “then” (Hemingway 3). This is immediate, unadorned. Hemingway is conscious of the lessons he learned about himself because of Paris, as he alludes to them in the discussion about writing about Paris, but they have not yet been fully realized. Hemingway lived in Paris between 1921 and 1926, but it took him until 1957 to begin work on his account of that time, understanding, as stated above, that time makes sense of Parisian stories. He starts in the

middle of an ongoing conversation about the experience of living in Paris, unlike Putnam and Cowley, who start their narratives in the States in the days or months prior to the authors' voyages to Paris.

Putnam recounts the first evening he and his wife spend in Paris, strolling through the city and finding themselves in the Tuileries. The scene is described simply as “the Tuileries with a moon above” (50). The author's wife bursts into tears at the sight. For Samuel Putnam and his wife, that evening in the Tuileries is the culmination of their escape from middle-American drudgery and an “instinctive reaction to the physical beauty and ultimately unanalyzable psychic charm of a city which for centuries has been the refuge and the home of exiles, of lost souls and, yes, of lost generations as well” (50). Putnam treats the sentimentality of his wife's tears somewhat ironically in the text, but the simple fact is that Paris encourages this type of sentimentality and the writer must struggle to keep it in check and to write about the city as clearly and truthfully as possible.

The Parisian environment is one of the reasons the city has become a destination for artistic and literary exiles for generations. Malcolm Cowley describes Paris as a drug – “a great machine for stimulating the nerves and sharpening the senses. Paintings and music, street noises, shops, flower markets, modes, fabrics, poems, ideas, everything seemed to lead toward a half-sensual, half-intellectual swoon” (135). This whirlwind of sensuality engulfs the artist upon his arrival, and doesn't ever truly release its grip. This is the buffet that Gopnik talks about – the overwhelming swirl of artistic expression and

new ideas and the inherent intoxication of being set apart in a new land combine to make Paris a powerful drug. This sort of frenzy could not have happened in the States, where political and societal forces colluded to create an environment of oppression, especially in the years surrounding World War I. Paris, because of its separateness, allowed its American residents to explore different ways of thinking, both artistically and politically. Thus the American residents created their own Paris, one of many. The intensely proud French Paris was not necessarily aware of or concerned with the American colony. These two separate Parises were “near to being a world in itself which only now and then touched, overlapped, or came into conflict with the [other]” (Putnam 58). To be separate from not only their American lives but also the greater world of Paris and its inhabitants performed a double exile, enabling the Americans to create their own society within the greater society of Paris and the historical society of outcasts.

Despite their lofty intentions, this new society was not above the classist divisions that so frustrated the Americans while at home. Hemingway writes of his café, the Closerie des Lilas, saying,

People from the Dôme and the Rotonde never came to the Lilas. There was no one there they knew, and no one would have stared at them if they came. In those days many people went to the cafés at the corner of the Boulevard Montparnasse and the Boulevard Raspail to be seen publicly and in a way such places anticipated the columnists as the daily substitutes for immortality. (81)

Putnam adds his commentary about the distinction between cliques of artists, from the opposite perspective – being one of the regulars at the Dôme, he witnesses the arrival of Sinclair Lewis, who seats himself in a prime location, hoping to be recognized. “At the same time, through a seemingly tacit and simultaneous understanding, all those at the Dôme appear to be agreed that no notice whatsoever is to be taken of Mr. Lewis’s presence” (Putnam 101). Thus the Parisian colony turns up its nose at the literature being crafted stateside, further solidifying their status as insiders in the innovative European artistic scene. The organized dismissal of Mr. Lewis and his subsequent shame-faced exit from the café elicits “a giggle, becoming a laugh, [which] runs around the tables and spreads down the street to the Select. It is sufficient amusement for the next couple of hours...” (Putnam 101-102). The cliquishness of the Dôme members and their obvious feeling of superiority to the newly published American author (and several that came after him) separate the American colony in Paris from the previously acceptable locale of Greenwich Village. The Parisian colony looks down on authors and artists who come to Paris to be noticed while self-consciously preening. Paris has given these artists the freedom to create their own society, but it has also shown them to be egotistical and crude in their treatment of outsiders. To be sure, though Hemingway was not a frequent guest at the Dôme, he too displayed a sense of frustration and superiority when dealing with a writer who was not his equal. Interrupted at his work at the Lilas, Hemingway greets the interloper with an abrupt “You rotten son of a bitch what are you doing here off your filthy beat?” (92).

The freedom Paris affords is a double-edged sword – at once granting the ability to create a new artistic community while exposing the true, often self-serving and ugly motivations of those who partake in that society. There is space in Paris to be egotistical, to be self-serving, to be experimental and incorrect, because Paris doesn't care who you are when you arrive or who you become while you're there. The greater world of Paris goes on without ever noticing your existence, and that is what truly sets it apart as a destination for experimentation. You hitch yourself to Paris for the ride and will come out on the other side a changed person, through little or no deliberate action of your own.

The self-conscious castigating of American outsiders and scathing commentary on their vulgar actions continues in William Faulkner's letters home during his stay in Paris in the summer of 1925. He describes his new friends thusly: "I have met one or two people – a photographer, and a real painter. He is going to have an exhibition in New York in the fall, and he sure can paint. I don't like the place I am living in. It's full of dull middle class very polite conventional people. Too much like being at a continual reception" (Faulkner 300). He goes on to compare the interaction between himself and a shopkeeper as also being like a reception, and the "awful" Americans that come to Paris in the summer, who he says "spit on the floor" of a stranger's home (300).

To distance himself from the American class that comes to Paris for the summer is an interesting tactical move on the part of Faulkner, considering his own fleeting engagement with the city in comparison to other American writers of the same generation such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Perhaps Faulkner is leaning on his status as a

journalist to identify him as a member of the creative class of Parisian residents. This distinction helps Faulkner distance himself from the traveling class and align himself with the artistic expatriates living in the city. He was little more than a summer sojourner himself, yet he intentionally separates himself from the holiday crowd. Being in Paris and following his creative pursuits there has changed how Faulkner views his countrymen and their actions. Perhaps the distance has only exacerbated frustrations with American culture that were already present, but Paris has a way of throwing these issues into sharp relief.

One of the underlying causes of the migration to Europe during this period was a search for freedom, for a place to effectively create artistic expression without fear of being censored. Years before the Lost Generation, Ralph Waldo Emerson, traveling to Paris in 1833, understood the draw of the freedom to be found in Paris. “Young men are very fond of Paris, partly, no doubt, because of the perfect freedom – freedom from observation as well as interference, - in which each one walks after the sight of his own eyes; & partly because the extent & variety of objects offers an unceasing entertainment” (Emerson 57). The freedom to do what one wishes without interference or judgment and the freedom to follow where one’s feet take them are the cornerstones of the Parisian experience. In the pre- and inter-war years, America’s reputation as a prude was well-known overseas. Parisians’ drastically different attitudes about morality, art and sex allowed American artists to shake off the judgment of American audiences and create works that would be free from expurgation and societal expectations. To be sure, not all

of the Lost Generation was successful in their attempts to translate this liberated art to American audiences – Hemingway ironically notes that after giving up journalism he is only able to sell his stories to a German magazine – everywhere he submits them in the States sends them back.

The essential differences between French and American society are cited by Nathaniel Parker Willis some years earlier, written like Faulkner from the perspective of the American journalist in Paris in his 1835 publication *Pencillings by the Way*. Parisian society is “a masque, where every one plays his character unconsciously, and therefore naturally and well. We get no idea of it at home” (Willis 65). Though the masquerade of society would have changed somewhat by the time the Lost Generation made their long journey across the Atlantic, this idea is echoed by Roger Shattuck in his book *The Banquet Years*. He writes of Paris, “she had become a stage, a vast theater for herself and all the world” (5-6). The great masquerade of French society allows the American colony to take up masks of their own – fitting themselves into the artistic and political schools springing up around the city. Freedom from the American political structure meant submission to the French, but the double exile the artists placed themselves under allowed them to subvert French politics as well as American, and involve themselves in the fashionable political factions being discussed in the cafés.

But why does Paris affect the outcasts of the Lost Generation and countless others, even now exploring the city, in such a profound manner? What is it about this city in particular that makes a former resident, regardless of how much time one has spent

back at home in their American lives feel “an almost irresistible desire to drop everything and go back at once, as soon as possible?” (Putnam 52). It is, as Putnam goes on to admit, near to impossible to explain this urge to those who have never been there, and they are likely to think you’re romanticizing the city and its appeal. But to someone who has experienced life in Paris, the draw is undeniable. Love for the city is insidious; it attaches itself to every experience, every meal, every moment you spend there. This love follows the outcast home and sings its siren song across the ocean and into the American suburbs. It has done so for me. It has never really stopped since I got home.

Everyone’s reasons for hearing the song are different – a member of the Lost Generation may return in search of the Paris he created, the summer backpacker in search of a remembered favorite bar or trail, the writer in search of a café table and inspiration. I would like to say that I’d go back for the food of Paris, having experienced the other side of the buffet, but before long I’m sure I would find myself refilling my drink and reveling in the freedom Paris offers. And if Paris is so affecting that even those who have long since returned to their normal American lives still hearken to the song of the city, how do we translate that love into writing for someone who has never experienced it?

Location is inextricably tied to the events of one’s life – the place in which events take place shapes and affects the events in ways that could not be duplicated elsewhere. “One’s vantage point – the angle from which he must see the world – is not of course fixed or constant, but we can see no more than our horizon of expectations permits” (Gray 53). Writing from our specific vantage point and writing about specific events

taking place in specific places takes on one of two perspectives – these pieces are either utterly about place, or place takes a back seat to the action of the story. Robert Root discusses the differences between essays written explicitly and implicitly about place, saying,

Some nonfiction works are expressly and explicitly essays of place; they set out to explore and to understand certain terrain. Other nonfiction works are incidentally and implicitly essays of place; they set out to tell a story of a life experience or report events of one kind or another and in order to fully accomplish what they set out to do must also fully present place. (170)

How a place is presented in nonfiction writing has to do with the writer's status as insider or outsider relative to the place they are writing about. The insider/outsider distinction is one that permeates the writing of Hemingway, Putnam, Cowley and others. Their writing makes it clear that they attained insider status while many of their same generation, even those who wanted to be insiders, could not. Root discusses a third option for writers of place however, somewhere in between interloper and stranger, "those who stay in a place long enough to become acclimated beyond the casual but not long enough to feel thoroughly intimate" (166). This is the space that some writers, including myself, find themselves inhabiting. Faulkner would also fit into this category as a chronicler of Parisian life; Faulkner's understanding of the Parisian experience went beyond that of the American travelers he castigated in his letter, but he was not as

intimate with the city as some of his compatriots. He could not write about Paris in the same easy way he might have written about his current apartment or his hometown, but nor was he a complete stranger exploring a place he'd never seen.

The struggle for the somewhat-familiar writer is finding ways to fill in the gaps in her knowledge. One way to do so is to examine the writing of others who are more familiar. Doing so will give the writer a sense of the location across time, “comprehending the influences that time and perspective have in the way we perceive a place, and creating the means for readers to comprehend them as well” (Root 171). For although the city of Paris has changed over time, my understanding of it and my writing about it have been greatly enriched by reading voraciously about others’ experiences in the same city, although much of what I have read about happened generations ago.

Complicating the writing experience of the somewhat-familiar writer is the need to make the places they choose to write about immediately recognizable to those who have been there already, through careful description and imagery. Equally important is the inclusion of those who have not shared the experience of the place being written about – both types of readers must “feel they are in the same space, feel they would know the space again if they visited it in person” (Root 159). To me, this doesn’t necessarily mean that each location within the space ought to be described in equal detail, but that the writer is able to effectively capture the overall environment and ambience of the place, so that a reader entering it, taking that first breath of new air, would think *Yes, this is what it feels like*. This innate feel is the most ephemeral quality to capture, it changes with the

light, the seasons, yet it is undoubtedly what will give the stranger a sense of familiarity when visiting a space they have read about.

Our lives and the actions we take are inextricably tied to the places we inhabit, and the action of writing about places allows us a greater framework for reflecting upon our choices and their meaning. In this way, many essays or nonfiction books that are conceived as studies on specific places evolve into works about the events that take place in that particular place.

To grasp life in all its rounded complexity, seeing it as it has been seen from the perspective which constructed it, one must be able to re-envision the various physical settings of the existential drama... we know ourselves by rehearsing and incorporating what has happened in the many loci of our days. What I do and what befalls me together constitute my history and, to a large extent, my person. (Gray 55)

Gray goes on to state that the “pursuit of personal history entails such recreation of the emotional as well as the physical space in which a period of life was lived” (65). For the Lost Generation writers and for me to be able to effectively recreate our formative experiences in Paris, we must retreat into the space we then occupied, to rebuild the physical space we inhabited, the streets we walked, the room we slept in, the things we saw through those eyes. Writing about one’s personal history requires a constant sense of place in the continually-shifting spaces we inhabit, a sense of the map

we create as we move through our lives, marking all the places we have been and the happenings that affected us in each one.

Chapter 4: Why Paris?

Writing this document has been a struggle- a frustrating and fruitful experience. I expected my thesis to change and evolve as I wrote it, but I didn't expect to find myself re-evaluating my reasons for choosing to write about Paris. I have found myself re-framing my experiences in Paris in light of what I learned through my research, and it has given me a new perspective on why I feel the call to write about those days and why the siren call of Paris still echoes for me as it does countless other people.

I set out to write a thesis on Paris, but what I discovered was that I was much more an interloper in the Parisian setting than I wanted to admit. I struggled to orient myself to the city via maps and pictures and my own writing, tracing and retracing routes that were once second-nature to me. I pored over my worn Métro map to sketch the routes I had taken and Google-mapped my way around the city, connecting the dots of where I slept, where we ate, where we drank. I found pictures of the dorm we lived in, the gates of St-Anne, the pizzeria we loved, and I was able to recreate the feeling of what it was to be me in Paris in 2003. Relocating the feeling of Paris required not only geographical research but an emotional retreat back to who I was then. This retreat was one of the most surprising elements of writing this document – I had not expected the experience would require me to relive so deeply what I was feeling then. I have cried, I

have ranted, I have laughed at myself, and I have marveled that despite questionable decisions and a less-than-adequate grasp of the language, I thrived in Paris. I must agree with Samuel Putnam – it was one of the formative periods of my life. “My values are becoming more and more inner ones,” Putnam writes. “One doesn’t have to run away to Europe to achieve that, but I had to run somewhere, it seemed” (246). I had much the same experience. Being away, being in Paris, helped me to locate and learn to read the inner compass that was pulling me away from the world I had inhabited and showing me how much more I could see, touch, accomplish.

I discovered that what I thought would be a close examination of place needed to be a close examination of *me*, as contextualized by a specific place. I dwelled on the images, both physical and mental, that I brought with me from Paris. “Selecting certain past odors, sounds, sights and images for prolonged attention, creative memory illumines and elaborates the crucial way stations of our lives” (Gray 67). The months I spent in Paris were the crux of defining my emergent self, no longer adolescent but prone to rebellion, no longer rebelling against my family but against myself. Paris helped me to see my life for what it was and what it was going to be if I continued on my current path, but Paris was not the central character of the story – neither heroine nor villain, but simply the place where it all happened. Would it have happened the same way somewhere else? I can’t imagine so, because of my own predetermined ideas of what it was to live in Paris and what I was going to do while I was there. I went to Paris to “find myself” because that’s what I thought American kids did. The irony is that it actually

worked. My rebellion led me in a meandering path back to myself, and along the way I figured out how to exist comfortably alongside the self I had thought I wanted to become. The windings of my path saw me fully received back into my family and making my amends with God, with whom I had pleaded so arduously in Nôtre Dame and my bedroom.

Realizing that my story was not as much about Paris as it was about me was not enough. I had to pull back the lens of the story to include the forces that drove me or led me to Paris: including outward forces such as the tension within my normally very close-knit family, the feeling of chafing against the borders of the small world I had been inhabiting, the tension between the caregiver role I adopted toward my fiancé and the type of role I wanted in a relationship, and tensions between myself and the men I would encounter in Paris built a richer, more comprehensive context for my story.

I romanticized Paris in a way I think only Americans do – and perhaps I still fall into this trap. We have a long history of looking to Paris to be our “idea of happiness, of good things eaten and new clothes bought and a sentimental education achieved. Paris suggests the idea of happiness as surely as an arrival in New York suggests hope and Los Angeles, in literature at least, hopelessness” (Gopnik xiii). I had built up Paris in my mind to be a place where I could be myself, whoever that was. In Vivian Gornick’s words, “I fell in love with it and I romanticized it, made a mystery of the atmosphere and myself in it” (11). I thought that the mystery-making was the story, but in fact the story came from my unraveling of a complicated and messy situation while enveloped in the

mysterious fog of Paris. I left Paris no closer to truly solving its mysteries than I was when I arrived. It was myself I had figured out.

The struggle, then, is and has been to make sense of the ways in which Paris affected my realizations and spurred me to make new and different sense out of the same pieces of myself I had when I left the States. What made the difference for me was café culture. In Paris it's not odd to sit alone in a restaurant or café as it is here, and I relished the time to myself, cultivating an outwardly sophisticated picture (or so I imagined) while writing, doodling or watching passers-by. I needed to feel that sense of autonomy, being ok by myself and getting by in a different culture. I have always enjoyed eating by myself or sitting in a café for the afternoon alone, while I suppose it's considered odd to many Americans. The café culture allowed me the perfect opportunity to spend my days the way I like – alone, but surrounded by others. That time alone provided ample distance not only from Josh but from my family, school, my friends – everything about the life I had been living, distance that allowed me to reevaluate my decisions in light of my radically expanded idea of what life could be like.

The places in which the pivotal (and occasionally not-so-pivotal) moments of our lives happen create a matrix through which we can trace our experiences. For me, those places include a normal suburban kitchen outside of Philadelphia, a dorm in the 14th arrondissement of Paris, and the living room of a dingy row house in Harrisburg. I am not the only one whose experiences are marked by tiny dots all over the city of Paris, but

my life would certainly not be what it is today without those glowing reminders of where I have been.

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Vita

Jessica Evans Sculthorpe was born on July 4, 1981 in Long Branch, New Jersey. In 2003 she studied abroad at the American University of Paris. Her time there forms the basis of this work. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Art History from Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 2004. She moved to Richmond, Virginia in 2005 and currently works at Owens and Minor, a medical and surgical supplies distributor.