

from “A Paris Journal”

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July 5, 2009. What an idea, a Sunday outdoor market in Paris featuring not antiques, imported fruit, or cast-off clothing, but birds. As good a way as any to worship, so we take a quick detour on our way to church, which is near the Pompidou. The *we* equals Jacqui and me and our two children, Dylan, thirteen, and Tessa, ten. We pass through aisles of finches, parakeets, parrots, and dozens of birds I can't name, cataloguing the ones we would like to own. If only we could do away with the cages, if only the birds loved their owners enough to return once set free.

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Lance: Do people laugh differently in French?

Jacqui: I haven't heard much laughing.

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A humid, overcast, slightly breezy morning: our fasting in a foreign land carries not just hunger, but curiosity, beauty, even portent. We pass five or six homeless congregated around a bench, the only woman in the group wolfing potato chips, like a character from Dickens.

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Jacqui brainstorming on scratch paper for her upcoming art show. A series of skirts and dresses: Thistle Gown, Whisper Dress, Dress of Lights, Birthday Dress, Babel Ball Gown, Alphabet Dress, Letters Dress, Graffiti Skirt, Patisserie Party Dress, and the Life Voyage Dress.

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So far the only testimony I've understood completely: a tourist from Japan speaking in English and being translated into French. He arrived this morning and was still undecided: attend church or head to the hotel to rest? He prayed in the bathroom and received

his answer—go to church. And now a testimony by a bald, articulate American who admits he used to roll his eyes at President Monson’s homey stories till President Monson became prophet. Now a year later, he loves those stories and has learned from them. And for a finale, another American—a sober, emotional man, who shares in French his love of the members after serving a mission here thirty years ago. In front of us, a black woman, hair wrapped in a pink scarf, who has been eating snacks and swigging bottled water the entire meeting, claps quietly to herself at something he said.

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For the closing hymn we sing “I Know That My Redeemer Lives,” and Jacqui begins to cry. She leans over to me: “In two years we’ll be doing the same thing in a testimony meeting somewhere in Andalusia when Derek finishes up his mission.” Derek is our oldest son, who has been serving in Malaga, Spain, since March.

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Dylan: “Would you rather eat a bowl of question marks for breakfast or a plate of exclamation points for dessert?”

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We hear the music outside the Pompidou before we see the orchestra. We draw closer to the crowd. Wait, not an orchestra at all, but a boom box, and beside it an artist, bandanna tied around his head, painting a face upside down in white acrylic. He follows the violin swells, his whole body feeling the moment—first with his paint brush, then his hand. A kind of publicly orchestrated ecstasy, performance art. He finishes the painting at the same exact moment that the music reaches its crescendo, then dies away. He lifts the painting from the easel, spins it around till it’s right side up, and voilà—Barack Obama.

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Between Les Halles and Saint Eustache, a complex of gardens, walkways, and water. Yes, fountains, ponds, small rivers—an ingenious maze of liquid. And nearly all of it neglected: stagnant, moss everywhere, scum, leaves, floating plastic bottles, garbage bags, stench. And no attempt to clean it up. I keep wanting to convert this into an allegory, but of what? And if this scene were an al-

legory, which pond, if I cleared away the moss, would feature my name written on the bottom?

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In the subway station, a full six-person band playing what sounds like Spanish folk music: upright bass, guitar, trumpet, trombone, recorder, and accordion. Celebration tinged with melancholy. Our daughter Tessa clicks a picture and we step back into our hunger and the next train home to break our fast. What simple delicacies we will add to our everyday diet back in Springville: green olives, feta cheese, hummus, arugula, dark European chocolate, baguettes. But where, where do you get real baguettes in Utah?

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The Cluny/La Sorbonne metro station tosses us up right beside some Gallic-Roman baths dating from the third century, which we circle indifferently on our way to the Cluny Medieval Museum. How quickly we grow accustomed to things beautiful and old, especially when they're falling apart.

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And when you look up above the tapestries, multiple arches, like spider webs, like fireworks exploding. Of the smaller icons, the reliquaries mesmerize me the most. Of course, they are all closed and behind glass, their icons and pieces of tunic and ancient locks of hair and shriveled thumbs of saints long ago removed, which leaves my ten fat fingers twitching and hungry.

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Self-assignment one: write a poem about the way blood behaves in religious paintings. Self-assignment two: write a poem that repeats the word "hands" in every line.

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The Unicorn Tapestries: because they date from the fifteenth century and hang in a circle with the viewer in the middle, because the room is darkened, because the lighting is from above and dim and therefore vaguely celestial, because each tapestry offers a unicorn (Mary's symbol), because the murmuring of patrons is hushed and in French, because docile animals are part of

the pattern here, one feels not returned to Eden, but further exiled.

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In the frigidarium, partially restored, we look from one column fragment to the next. Carved tusks, a pair of crucified Christs. And now my eye travels upward to an arch on the second floor, where I stood just five minutes ago on a balcony overhang. There beside one of the most iconic metal crosses I've ever seen, not the Virgin, but a middle-aged woman with gray hair wearing a pant suit in tacky bright blue. How we're always trying to insert ourselves into the sacred. If not her, then me. Maybe she's from Omaha or a small town in Texas, this museum visit part of a two-week, whistle-stop tour of Europe. She looks down, tries to show interest in our concerns, then shrugs and wanders away.

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During the Revolution, the untutored mob attacked Notre Dame itself. Mistaking the stone sculptures of Jewish kings for secular French kings, dissidents lopped off the stone heads. The story goes that some prescient individual gathered them up, spirited them away, and buried them. As one website puts it, "For nearly two centuries, the kings' heads lay hidden in the foundations of a Paris bank before work to upgrade the bank's computer system in 1977 led to the extraordinary discovery of the lost treasure."

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Fifteen white worry stones, eleven black—side by side, a way of cataloguing our daily troubles?

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Back home for yogurt, then out again, this time to Jardin de Plantes, a popular destination on Sunday evenings. We make a couple of laps on the tree-lined avenues inside the park before spying an empty bench. Behind us, his back inches from our own, sits a shriveled leathery man, alone with his stuffed sleeping bag and rolled pad. He's trying to read a book. His feet scrape the dirt, he repositions himself, his mouth lets out a sigh (or is it more of an audible grimace?), then in a fit he grabs his face, some sort of private agony, as if bugs were chewing his cheeks from inside.

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"I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need" (Phil. 4:12).

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Whistles, shouted instructions, several uniforms on patrol: it is almost closing time, which is strictly enforced in Jardin de Plantes. A frail old man with a pointy nose stands up from the grass, plucks from a tree a sprig of yellow flowers, and twirls it between thumb and finger, like a child.

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A pair of young fathers pushing strollers eases by. Another grimace, and the man behind us shakes his head once, then twice, to free himself of gremlins. Dead leaves everywhere. A pigeon as black and fat as a crow begs cookie crumbs. Jacqui sketches, Tessa reads, Dylan designs on his sketch pad a utopian city without a name. We must all do something, it seems, to justify the minutes we've been given on this planet. The birds in the cathedral of branches above have already beat us to the singing.