L’AUTRIER JOST’UNA SEBISSA

1. *L’autrier jost’una sebissa*

To paraphrase Marcabrun: “The other day,

I spied that kohl-eyed waitress from the 2nd Street café

Ducking through the hedgerows to take her break

In the late sun, on a park bench by the lake;

And liking the coffee and cream looks of her, I sat

Close as I dared and dallied awhile in pick-up chat.

‘A bit chilly today!’ I said. ‘Oh?’quoth she. (Babe speak

For ‘Chilly? I’ll show you chilly, you pestiferous freak.’)

‘So what brings a sweet thing like you,’ I said,

‘To this neck of the wilds? Are you sure it’s safe?

It’s quite the evening trek to make through the woods alone.’

‘Please,’ answered she. ‘I am not some little airhead.

You can save your familiarities of tone

For bimbos in tank-tops and those cute shoes that chafe.’”

~ pretty loosely adapted from the 12th century Occitan

2. *Sur les traces de Marcabrun*

I’m writing this in Auvillar, the tiny town in South-West France where the troubador Marcabrun was born, circa 1100--meaning that Occitan, not medieval French, was the local language in which he composed his lyrical effusions and his rants, his satires and his pastorals. He was by all accounts quite the celebrity, from France down to Castilia; some of his songs were big popular hits, and scores of them are still extant. The sonnet I offer above is a fairly faithful updating of the first four stanzas of one of his pastorals, puzzled over in the original and understood from a modern French gloss; my essay’s title is its first half-dozen words.

Their literal sense is, “The other day by a hedgerow,” and the original ingenue was a “pastora mestissa,” a mixed-race shepherdess. I can’t say with certainty where the narrative went next—the website I got my copy from didn’t supply the ending—but can’t we all guess? It’s a seduction song; 12th century girl or no, if she’s more slippery than her genre counterparts since, why is the poet so blithely singing about it? No, my bet is it’s the same flirty prelude: she’s weak or she’s coy, and in time, she’ll deliciously succumb.

I didn’t read much Marcabrun before I left home, but I had hoped to immerse myself in his work once I got here; I hoped for too much. Walking in his 900 years ago footsteps, peering across the centuries for his spirit, the few traces of it I unearth are without much text or ceremony. Auvillar, a spectacular tourist village of fewer than 1000 people, has three museums that tout the other notables who once brought it a degree of fame and are now long gone—its master ceramicists; its rivermen; its goose quill craftsmen—but Marcabrun doesn’t even make the guidebooks. The single tribute to him (I checked at the *Office du Tourisme* in case I’d missed something) is a plaque 20 feet above eye-level that dedicates the clock-tower to his memory. Music thrives here—during my August visit there have been a dozen classical concerts plus two disco spectaculars; the visual arts are showily represented (if not that heavily courted) at antique stores and a clutch of contemporary galleries; I’ve seen street theater, children’s theater, and a touring version of a classic play; but you won’t find so much as a decent bookstore for miles.

Still, there’s us. We’re four visiting Fellows at the French branch of an American artists’ colony, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. This month, we’re a painter, a playwright, a journalist writing her first novel, and me. Our Resident Director is, like me, a poet, though my main task here is to finish a play. In a few days, we’re holding an open house; the playwright, the novelist, and I will read from our work, or have it read, in French; I’m looking forward to making my little bray of a poet’s voice heard.

3. *Bray*

*Bray* is a word I’m using now; I’ve heard, and seen, my first real donkey’s bray while here in Auvillar. It was not what I expected.

I took an imaginary photo of it. As is normal with imaginary pictures, the edges are blurred, a kind of florid oval darkness, like a frame around a tintype; and it’s stylized, with artsy foreshortenings, so that the geese penned below the donkey on the hillside scuttle around the pool with their wings high, like sprinters crossing different finish lines, all convinced they’ve won. The other animals of this little farm—two-thirds of the way up the very steep, half-kilometer of road that leads into town from the riverbank—aren’t in the frame but are floridly part of it; if I concentrate, I’m blurrily aware of them. That curlicue down left is the dirty brown fishpond, thick with dirty brown trout; upslope of the donkey, wreathed in olive-greeneries and stacked as if they might topple on him, are a chained dog and two smaller donkeys. They’re barely a presence, apologetically self-effaced. And here he himself is at the high center, his long head thrust forward and his mouth, in profile, parted in its small recumbent V. I unfreeze the image and the mouth closes and opens, closes and opens; nothing else moves—I love imaginary pictures, the only kind I’ve ever thought are worth those supposed thousand words; and then the soundtrack kicks in. Not the cry of the geese, farmed for their *foie*, who if they are scuttling must certainly be squawking; not the noise of my own breath, which this high up the hill must be coming from me in gulps. Only the startle of the donkey’s bray—his silhouette, but for the discreetly splayed mouth, unmoving—exclaiming with controlled lyric ferocity his commentary on all this, on his indolent, precarious square foot of a life.

*Bray* is a fine verb for that asthmatic police-siren of a voice; I’m less sure about the supposed onomatopoeia *hee-haw*. The tone of the word is derisory and dismissive, whereas the noise I heard was *serious*. The real *hee* is a tiny querulous in-suck, cousin to the *hee* in *tee-hee*, but uttered (I thought) as complaint instead of laughter; the *haw* is a dozen times its length and volume, and comes from the baritone depths of the donkey’s chest, like a blues howl of perpetual misery. There might be no *hees* at all for the length of several *haws*, although then the *hees* might follow in batches, a punctuating stutter.

I speak donkey no better than I do Occitan; this one, for all I know, may, in fact, be braying his happy praises of the azure August sky. But melancholy or ecstatic, I know an authentic singer when I hear him: donkey, I thank you for so vividly welcoming me to our fellowship of local poets.

4. *Pélerinages*

We walk up this hill to the village often; our house and our studios are at its foot, and the shops are at the summit. At the same point on it as the farm, there’s a kind of slug and snail crossing. The slugs always seem to be around; after it rains, the snails come out too. I wrote a postcard poem comparing them with the pilgrims who stream through town on their way to the basilica of St. James, in Campostello, in Galicia, in northwestern Spain:

By day and sometimes night,

at their same staunch, stoic pace,

the pilgrims of the *chemin de Saint-Jacques*

hike humpbacked through.

One recent evening between the rain showers,

near the top of the hill where the road forks off into its tributary,

we watched a colony of snails,

shouldering their own smaller backpacks,

trudging and trudging from the curb to the swell of the camber,

as they swiveled the tiny metronomes of their horns.

March of the little tar paths slick with stars.

One detail I omitted from that piece is that the Auvillarais are well aware of when the snails will appear, and so they harvest them. “Oh, yes, we eat the snails,” they say, rather mystified as to just what astonishes me. And of course, they know when the pilgrims will be here also—and although they are kind enough not to harvest them, they do make their living off them, just as they do off the more secular tourists.

I understand much of the appeal of such pilgrimages. I have a healthy mystical streak, I adore walking, and I love visiting the villages of France—during my stay I’ve walked to several of the neighboring towns. The *chemin de Marcabrun* would be more my style, though; for no better reason than it wove through hedgerows, I followed one path along the river until it disappeared miles later among the brambles. The legend of St. Jacques de Campostelle is wildly mystical, but it can also be silly; in the way most ritual behaviors become silly, by sanctifying their tics, so are many of the ornate tributes of his devotees. In one central aspect, though, his tale is truly disturbing. The legend is that the body of St. James, who was decapitated by the Romans in the Holy Land, was brought in a stone boat to Galicia by two of his followers. (They had had a vision; it said said *stone boat*; so they took the time to have a stone boat made, and hallelujah, it floated.) When they set the cadaver down, the earth around it turned into a Roman era sarcophagus. There is a real Roman era tomb to support this notion (whose it is and when it got there are up for discussion, and have been much discussed), but as it wasn’t discovered until 800 years or so after St. James’s death (by a shepherd who saw a star, the story goes), and since there is no evidence at all for the veracity of any other part of the legend, and not much either for the alternative explanations, *all* the big claims are pretty darn suspect.

What crosses the line into disturbing is when St. James comes to the aid of a Galician army fighting back the invading Moors: clothed in light, the legend goes, he slaughters the infidels by the hordes. There were all kinds of justifications made in the Middle Ages for the Crusades, and it would not be fair to lay too much blame for them at the portal of the Campostello basilica; but St. James did become the patron saint of that series of wars, and from a holy symbol, he evolved, for the Galicians, at least, into an emblem of national righteousness and bellicose patriotic fervor. And aren’t we still living with, and still playing out anew, that same vicious scenario?

And didn’t Marcabrun himself—to efface any distinction I may have implied between us poets and the rest of the world’s braying idiots—write a poem called, in French, “le Chant du lavoir”? And wasn’t it his biggest hit of all? And wasn’t it an exhortation to go to the Holy Lands and join the Holy War?

Well, we are all, we humans, of our age. Unlike the donkeys, and the snails, and their animal kind, who in their catechism-free constancy, are eternal.

5. *Pour les autres*

Perhaps half of what I write, still, eventually works its way back to one biographical fact: I was born a *métis*, a mixed-race child of mixed race parents, in Cape Town, South Africa, at the dawn of the apartheid era; and so my family fled, and became refugees. Not that we felt like refugees for long—my father made us an economic place; but I certainly grew up as a foreigner. And because I’ve changed countries two more times since, I still and always will, everywhere, feel like a foreigner.

Marcabrun was a foundling, left at a rich man’s door; the shepherdess by the hedgerow is mixed race, a *métisse*. In person, I’m one of those easygoing types who some people find wishy-washy, because I insist that I like almost everybody—which is true (the liking almost everyone, and often the wishy-washy). But I have paper to tell my fierce sympathies and antipathies to, and I do: I root for and identify with the excluded, the others; I despise holy warriors of every stripe, at least when they are acting as holy warriors, because they exclude; I strive to like everyone (including off-duty holy warriors) on ferocious principle; I believe in poetry as the act of miniscule, meticulous inclusion.

All the times I have climbed that hill, I’ve never seen anyone on that farm pay the least bit of attention to their donkey, and I’d like that querulous animal to keep pointing this fact out until someone who works there does; I want that *métisse* shepherdess (is she part Moor? gosh, I hope so!) somehow to surprise the heck out of her would-be seducer, maybe even by meticulously and precisely braying or baaing, maybe even by tearing his clothes off right there and feeding them to her sheep as they screw, anything to wipe that “I know you because I know your type” tone from his one-track hard-drive; I want a healthy percentage of those slow, slow snails to be able to savor the wet tar glory of their minuscule swath of road long enough to make it uneaten to the other side; I want someone to open a decent bookstore in this place and sell the poems of Marcabrun and gaudy its walls with his name.

Marcabrun, a reputedly great poet, had the misfortune to write in an almost dead language and be born in a village that now seems immune to literature; he’s even more of an outsider than I thought before I got here; foolish as he was about the Crusades—as foolish and as human and as of his time as we all are, and pandering to it, as we all do—he deserves to be better remembered here. One evening, quite soon, at least, I will dedicate a reading to him.

6. *Sur une flûte irlandaise*

It’s my last afternoon in Auvillar; I’ve spent much of the day watching a half-dozen pieces of my laundry bounce about in the overcast breeze. I washed them during the night and hung them before breakfast, but twice I’ve walked away from them, and twice the rain has moved in and drenched them again. My train leaves early in the morning, and some of these wet things I want to wear, and the rest I need dry enough to pack. So instead of going for a long farewell walk—I intended to find a hedgerow, follow the line of it for an hour or so, and play my *flûte irlandaise* to a clump of trees—I’m climbing, for the first time, to the very back of the back garden of the Fellows’ House.

This splendid and doddery edifice, officially called *La Vieilhescazes* (Occitan for “old house,” and also the family name of its former owners) is not, in fact, that old by the standards of the village; it’s 17th century. Just two doors away, there stands a dilapidated church from somewhere between (accounts differ) the 9th and 12th. But it’s recently restored, by the *commune,* who are leasing it to the VCCA, and it’s quite impressive enough for us. Our rooms are spartanly magnificent, the kitchen is well-appointed (once one adjusts to the parsimonious and interminably thorough washing machine), the lounging area is vast and elegant. What more could a visiting artist ask? Still, there are nooks and crannies of it we haven’t explored much: our studios are right next door in a separate building (*La Cebo*, another Occitan name), and we’ve spent our time working there, or trekking up the hill to the village, or out on our voyages of cultural genuflection. We haven’t wholly ignored the garden—there’s a huge fig tree we’ve fed from daily, and grapevines who could help but plunder, and a white table and chairs, back near the drying line, where most evenings we’ve brought food and wine, to dine beneath the stars. But the grounds go back a hundred yards beyond that point, up a steep incline with no path, to a wood that shields us from the noise of the road.

It may not quite be a hedgerow, but all in all, for my ritual of farewell, it’ll do very nicely.

The reading was two evenings ago; it was an odder experience, in the end, than I’d anticipated. The French words of my poems felt heavy in my mouth, and their length more cumbersome than in the privacy of my studio. Still, I read, in both English and French, the piece about the snails (now called “Pilgrims of the Chemin du Peyrat”, which is the Occitan name for the street where we watched them) and dedicated it to Marcabrun and said why; and just today I was asked if the village could put the French version on their website. So more than a small victory; one which fully merits the toot of the *flûte irlandaise* I am about to give this stand of trees.

The *flûte irlandaise* (not as fancy as its French name makes it sound, only a pennywhistle; I pack one whenever I travel, and once, in the UK, when I forgot, had to rush off the next day to a music shop) also feels a bit awkward in my mouth; I haven’t played it since the ceremonial flourishes I delivered from the bridge the day after my arrival. But I manage a few lines of “The Parting Glass,” and a stanza of “Farewell, Farewell,” and it feels enough. I head back down to squeeze the sleeves of my shirts and the waists of my pants and see if I’m done yet. On the way, it occurs to me that what I’m tromping through was once a true orchard. There’s a plum tree laden with ripe fruit; I’m stepping onto a carpet of windfalls. And an apple tree, thin but bearing, little red apples in clumps. And this is a walnut—I can tell because half a dozen of the green pods have burst open and opened the shells to the air. How many missed and misperceptions, after only a month here, do I leave unmodified; how many ragged riches do I leave undiscovered? “Look!” I shout to my housemates, their three faces leaning over the veranda, where they’ve gathered to make fun of me, fussing and fretting over my damp laundry. And the sky may be starting to spit at it again, but there are still a few hours of hope and daylight; it may yet dry; I leave it jigging in the wind. And I skip to where the grass gives way to concrete, and to the watchers in my sky I hold up the ragtag glories of my bright new backyard haul.