

## A CHICAGOAN IN PARIS<sup>THE</sup> ROMANTICIZED CITY LIVES UP TO ITS REPUTATION IN A WHIRLWIND OF ART, FOOD AND HISTORY

by Clara Rose Thornton

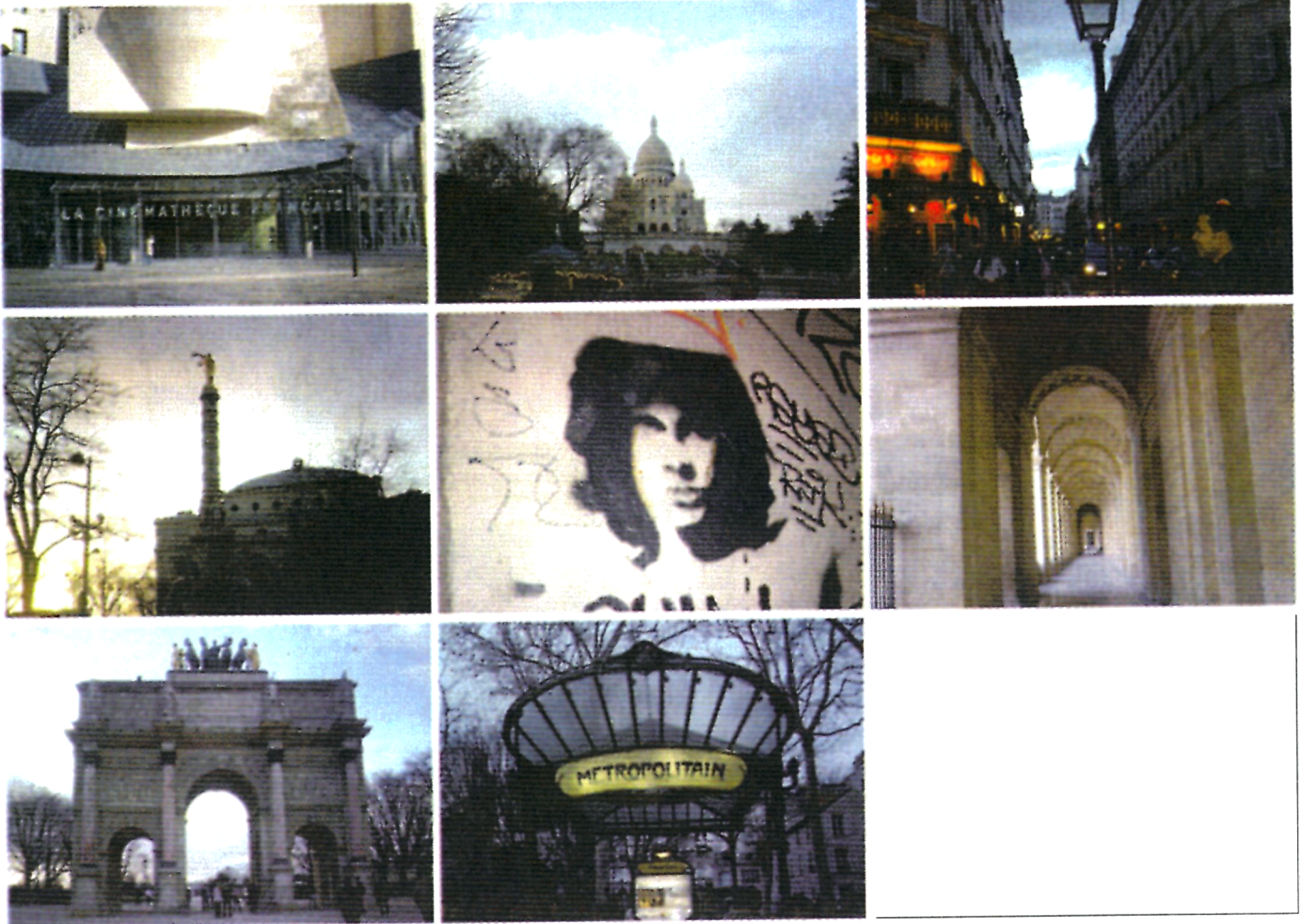
In a 2005 novel about his time living at Shakespeare and Company, a legendary Parisian bookstore for English-speaking writers and intellectuals, Canadian crime reporter Jeremy Mercer ponders penitentiaries: “Hard time,” he writes in *Time Was Soft There*, is a term used by convicts to describe sentences in maximum-security facilities, time that passes painfully and leaves its murderers and sex offenders bitter upon release. Alternately, there’s “soft time”—minimum-security stints that pass comfortably and with pleasure. “Time at Shakespeare and Company,” he concludes, “was as soft as anything I’d ever felt.”

Shakespeare and Company (37 Rue de la Bucherie), like most talked-about places in Paris, has taken on a mythical quality. The small, teeming bookstore across the Seine River from Notre Dame became a haven for writers passing through the city, the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway filling its earlier days and paving the way for its modern-day lecturers, poets and occasional riff-raff. Like Mercer’s time at a bookstore-cum-literary-commune that seems completely removed from the rest of the planet’s daily drudgery, so too does Paris, as a whole, seem to

float its visitors on a plush mattress through a time-forgotten sky, where all lore and legend is not overstuffed fancy but indeed deserved characterization.

The first week of March was my second trip to Paris, and this time I dug deeper into the city’s proverbial catacombs. I stayed with my cousin Jules, who has a charming apartment in the 19th *arrondissement* (Paris is broken into 20 numbered neighborhoods that swirl around one another in a snail shape), and therefore was introduced to Parisian nightlife by an embedded denizen. For example, my first night I was absorbed into the ranks of an amazing group of 20-somethings, all close friends of Jules, and went club-hopping at off-the-beaten-path dungeons of decadence until 6 a.m. With less solo wandering and trial and error this time around, I dove right into Parisian life.

Upon arrival, surfacing from the subway in the 18th *arrondissement* was like being dropped into a whirlpool of clatter, culture and cobblestones. Vendors in open-air fruit markets argued with customers. Mothers perused discount-clothing racks set up outside while spastic children chased one another around the plethora of



benches arranged on median strips in the street. Pungent cheese odors wafted from the *fromageries* while patrons lined up to buy tiny artisan pastries at quaint *patisseries*.

Jules and I ate at Le Relais Gascon (6 Rue des Abbesses), a gourmet salad restaurant not far from La Butte de Montmartre—the hill on which sits La Basilique du Sacre Coeur. The hill is the highest point in the city, and in front of this beautiful church, visitors can look down on a panoramic Paris. The towering stairs climbing the hill were visible from where we sat, outside, under an awning as it rained on an impossibly warm winter Saturday.

Later we met up with Jules' friends—including a Nicaraguan law student raised in Switzerland and enamored with independent film, an Indian medical student recently returned from Amsterdam and a comedic young man from small-town France who'd give anything to be on *Nip/Tuck*—and descended upon a loungey bar/restaurant called Le Zinc de Cavistes (5 Rue du Faubourg Montmartre), which reminded me of Chicago nightspot Rodan. Afterward we hopped the Métro to the 11th *arrondissement* to the funky Bastille neighborhood, named for the commemorated site of the prison where the French Revolution began in 1789. It was amazing to walk across the spot where Marie Antoinette was dragged to her beheading to the delight of cheering peasants and liberated prisoners, and yet one block away stood the ultra-modern red-velveted club Sanz Sans (49 Rue du Faubourg St. Antoine), where I recognized several of the DJ's classic Chicago and Detroit house tracks. It was like traipsing through a global village time warp.

Two nights later, after a day spent at La Cinematheque Française (51 Rue de Bercy)—a personal mecca and the oldest and most comprehensive cinematheque on the planet—and seeing the Dutch and Flemish paintings (Vermeer is a god) at the Louvre (99 Rue de

Rivoli), I found myself in a packed Shakespeare and Company listening to celebrated American journalist Barry Lando read from his book about Western political involvement in the Iraq war. Afterward, store clerks brought out wine, cheese and bread, and the affair promptly turned into a party. Here I met three people from Bloomington, Indiana, who were traveling through Europe working on organic farms for room and board. Since it was such a lovely night, we decided to buy another bottle of *vin rouge* and sit on the ancient stone banks of the Seine, musing over Notre Dame's gothic solemnity while one of the fellows read us his poetry about Baudelaire.

And on it went like this—meeting groups of seekers from all over the world, sharing a bit of life with them, and then moving on for morsels of history like the palatial Opéra (8 Rue Scribe) and Père Lachaise Cemetery (16 Rue du Repos)—where Jim Morrison, Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust and Amedeo Modigliani are buried. Before a Dave Matthews solo concert at La Cigale (120 Blvd. Rochechouart) in the heart of the old Montmartre bohemian district, down the street from the notorious Moulin Rouge (82 Blvd. de Clichy), I met a girl who'd taken the train in from Switzerland that morning for the show; we went out afterward to a nearby bar called Ziclove (11 Rue Joseph de Maistre). This final evening typified not only my entire trip, but the essence of Paris through my eyes as a string of the “softest” moments possible: Two girls from opposite ends of the globe, joined by a lust for art, meeting each other randomly, talking for hours about philosophy, love and their life's woes until 3 a.m. while being serenaded by a guitar-wielding chanteuse belting Mother Love Bone songs in a soft French accent, and then they're off into the night, trying not to slip on the rain-slicked cobblestones of lower Montmartre, never to see one another again.

*Ah, c'est la belle vie.*