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Embrace the Moon

Natalie J. Havlina
nhavlina@fiu.edu

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

EMBRACE THE MOON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Natalie J. Havlina

2019

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Natalie J. Havlina, and entitled Embrace the Moon, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Maneck Daruwala

John Dufresne

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 4, 2019

The thesis of Natalie J. Havlina is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2019

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

EMBRACE THE MOON

by

Natalie J. Havlina

Florida International University, 2019

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

EMBRACE THE MOON is a collection of six stories that explore how people respond when faced with the impossible.

A young woman welcomes a visit from her recently-deceased grandfather in the title story, while the narrator of “A Unicorn in Paris” dismisses the magical creature as a side effect of heartbreak. Like the dark power in Truman Capote’s “Master Misery,” the reality of the ghost and the unicorn remains ambiguous.

In other stories, the uncanny is dangerously real, as in Karen Russell’s Vampires in the Lemon Grove. “The Norban Birds of the Count Bartello-Sauvigny” feast on the women they charm with their song, and the little girl who runs out of Farragut State Park is only the first of the fairy tale figures to materialize in “Out of the Woods.”

EMBRACE THE MOON offers readers new perspectives on friendship, family, and the power of stories to shape identity.

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I. A UNICORN IN PARIS

The first time I saw the unicorn, I was sitting at a cafe across from the Solferino Metro stop, drinking coffee and cigarette smoke, shuffling a stack of unwritten postcards, and not thinking about Brad. Rain had laminated the street in front of me, and the rush of crowds and cars passing outside was blurred by the sheets of clear plastic that enclosed the Cafe Solferino's "outdoor" seating area. That's the French solution to the indoor smoking ban: sit outside until it's too cold to sit outside, then string up plastic and heaters and keep sitting outside. Your hands and face smolder along with your cigarette while the rest of you shivers under your raincoat.

Brad hates smoking. He hates smoking the way conservatives hate class action lawyers and liberals hate multi-national corporations. I took up the "filthy habit" the day I arrived in Paris. Cigarettes compliment coffee, and a cup of coffee can be better than a kiss.

This is why I was sitting outside when the unicorn strolled by. I didn't even blink, just shifted to flick ash off my cigarette. The day before, I'd watched a performance artist with blue hair and a turquoise tutu juggling green scarves outside the Centre Pompidou while she balanced a crystal ball on top of her head. The day before that, I'd listened to a rap song about Versailles blaring out of a boombox on the Boulevard Montparnasse while two women in powdered wigs and brocade dresses passed out flyers advertising their band. A unicorn on Boulevard St. Germain? Must have wandered over from the tapestry in La Musée Medieval on Boulevard St. Michel.

Wait, what?

I choked on smoke and looked up from the ashtray, fighting to control my coughing, wishing I'd splurged on some mineral water to go with my *café crème*. I turned in my chair, craning my neck to gape at the cleanest thing I'd seen since landing at Charles de Gaulle airport a week before. Filth is one of Paris's superlatives. The city's monuments and statues reflect its less savory smells—diesel and garbage and urine—as a layer of gray and grit. If you want something truly white in Paris, you've got to buy it at Zara or Camaïeu or one of the other chain stores along the Grands Boulevards.

The unicorn, though, was white. White white. Whiter than my skin after a Portland winter, whiter than the inside of a baguette, white enough that I actually did squint as the unicorn crossed the street and ambled down the stairs of the Solferino Metro stop.

I don't know how long I stared at the red Metro sign, but when I went to take my next drag, my cigarette had burned itself down to the filter and my coffee was cold. I pulled my wallet out of my purse, bits of tobacco sticking to my fingertips like confetti. I dropped a couple of Euros on the table and stumbled out to the sidewalk.

Someone must have gone to some serious trouble to get a horse that dolled-up, I thought. Must be a really committed performance artist. Or maybe they're going to stand outside one of the tourist traps with a hat on the sidewalk so people can put money in it for the privilege of petting a "unicorn." Kids will love that horse, especially the little girls. There was a time, back when I still played dress-up in my mother's old clothes and watched Disney movies, when I believed I was a unicorn.

But the unicorn was alone.

Horse, I reminded myself. Horse. Its owner must have been obscured behind an umbrella. Or I was seeing things. Maybe hallucinations were a side effect of my cocktail of coffee, cigarettes, and SSRIs. Maybe this was the next phase of post-breakup insanity. A unicorn? Seriously!

I walked back toward the river, away from Solferino and past the Metro stop for l'Assemblée Nationale. I didn't have a destination in mind. I was just wandering. Wandering was what I did. My guidebook was back in my hotel room, at the bottom of my suitcase, buried under my camera and my make-up.

I wandered my way to a table outside a restaurant called Chez Phillippe just off Place de la Bastille. I lit a cigarette and pulled my raincoat closer around me, perusing the menu. I realized Brad would have starved in Paris, if we'd come here together like we originally planned. He's a vegetarian who avoids hydrogenated foods and is allergic to wheat, dairy, peanuts, and soy. Not a single dish on Chez Phillippe's *carte* would satisfy all of his requirements.

I ordered *coq au vin* and a glass of Viognier and pulled the stack of postcards out of my purse. I had to get these written. Mom first. She would love the black and white shot of the Champs-Élysées. "Dear Mom," I wrote and stopped. I watched the ink thicken at the tip of my pen and soak into the postcard. The second M bled into a black blob.

Maybe I should start with an easier one. My friend Sarah. The Moulin Rouge. "Dear Sarah." I stopped. I put down the pen. I didn't want to be a downer by writing about how it wouldn't stop raining, how every time I tried to speak French the Parisians answered in English, or how I once made the mistake of getting on the Metro at rush hour

and found myself jammed so tightly between commuters that I didn't need to hold on to anything to stay upright through all the stops and goes and lurches of the ride.

It was physically the closest I'd been to anyone since Brad and I broke up.

I put the postcards back in their miniature paper sack and sat smoking. Would Brad be outraged by the restaurant's menu? It clearly discriminated against vegans. Or would concerns of multiculturalism force him to be tolerant? All of the "isms" he and our friends used to discuss over the dinner table sometimes ran together in my head. They would sit late into the night, long after I was ready for bed, drinking wine and critiquing everything from macro-brew beer and obesity to pick-up trucks and Christianity.

Was that why Brad had broken up with me—I wasn't intellectual enough? Or progressive enough?

I stabbed out my cigarette. Tomorrow, I was going to order veal and *foie gras*.

*

The next morning, I vowed to write the postcards over coffee and get them in the mail. Instead, I skipped breakfast and went to the Musée d'Orsay. I paced by Monets and Degas, Cézannes and Van Goughs, but the boats and ballet dancers, the still lifes and stars, were just more fragments of the drizzly city. I trudged up and down stairs, sulked on benches and scowled at sculptures, until I found myself looking out at Paris through one wedge-shaped pane of a giant, round window.

In the distance, the cathedral of Montmartre perched on its hill like an ivory-colored crown. Square-cut structures trailed down the slope to the blocky buildings of Rue de Rivoli, the border of the garden of the Tuileries. There, roaming in the trees just beyond the river, was the unicorn, startling as a stroke of white paint fresh from its tube.

Maybe, I thought, the unicorn was a new addition to the park, an attraction
l'Office de Tourisme was parading around to promote Paris as more kid-friendly.

Kids. Was that what it had really been about? Until my thirtieth birthday, until the
fight, I'd always assumed, without really thinking about it, that I would have kids
someday. Then there had been the restaurant, the pasta and tiramisu, the Chianti-colored,
velvet box. The charm bracelet.

I tried to freeze my falling face, but Brad saw. He waited to confront me until we
got home. How presumptuous of me, he said, how anachronistic, to assume he was going
to propose, to impose an arbitrary timeline on our lives. He was sorry. He just wasn't
ready. He was under a lot of pressure right now. He was saving up for a Prius. He'd just
bought a new mountain bike and wanted to volunteer in an orphanage in Africa or Asia
when he finished his MBA. After that, we could take time to travel and find charms for
my bracelet.

But what would be different for us in two or three years, I asked. We were already
committed to each other. We'd been together for almost eight years, living together for
six. All of our friends from college had already gotten married.

“Why do you want to get married? Marriage is an outdated institution that
oppresses women.”

“Well, but, if we want to have kids—”

“Have you listened to anything I've ever said? Shit, you know the world is
overpopulated and all those religious wackos just keep popping out kids. I'm not going to
be irresponsible by contributing to the problem.”