

Billet-Doux to Roger Cohen Further to His Paris Dispatch of January 30, 2021 in The New York Times
Or
This Last Year in Cadavre Exquis: A Few Things to Be Found in Paris

I

love you, Roger

Cohen, but you know nothing.

We still have Paris. We'll always have Paris,

until, of course, Paris decides otherwise. Which it could, for Paris

has a mind of its own – an often ornery one – and cares little for what you or I might want, or demand, it to be. You said, its lifeblood is cut off. Yes. You said, its nights are silenced. Yes. You said, dinner arrives earlier, and went on to add, *an abominable Americanization*. Yes. Gone are the museums, you said. Yes. Gone the tourist-filled riverboats plying the Seine, you said. Yes. Gone the sidewalk terraces. Yes. You said, even the “bisou”, the little kiss on both cheeks that is a rite of greeting or farewell, is gone. Yes, and yes. Paris is gone for now, you said. No. Roger — may I call you Roger? Actually, Mr. Cohen will do as well, it has rare metrical poise. No, let's disagree there: Paris is not gone.

But, perhaps, Mr. Cohen, to paraphrase a very dear writer-confreere, we occupy different worlds, you and I?

You said, you had returned – hmmm – nine weeks ago, now? Let me take you, Mr. Cohen, around Paris through fifty-two.

The last fifty-two weeks. We'll start here, at the Parc de la Villette, at the cusp of the north-eastern curve of town, the ancient abattoirs, home now to le Zénith, la Géode, le Trabendo, l'Argonaute, le Cabaret Sauvage, la Grande Halle, l'Espace Chapiteaux, la Philharmonie de Paris (names that soar like an incantation) and several kin: museums, theatres, concert halls, conservatories, submarines, arenas and more. Home, also, to the eight regal lions of Nubia, designed by Pierre-Simon Girard two centuries, or so, ago. Lions that crouch in wait, spewing neither fire nor ice nor aqua pura for the moment, but beholding everything, the change in skies, seasons, presidents, pandemics, populations, art and artists. The oldest immigrants here, indentured from Place du Château-d'Eau – that we humans now call Place de la République – back in 1867 when the abattoirs were birthed for the business of killing. The lions never blink, Mr. Cohen, they didn't when the Villette stood up for a gravely unwell immigrant intern twenty years back, when it performed virtuosic legal somersaults that'd have done its aerialists proud, all to keep her in France. And they haven't blinked to see her immigrant fire-dragon movement-maker, Flemish-Moroccan – and child of Hoboken (the original, Belgian, Hoboken) – rule the marquee every year these last ten years, but their eyes gleam in pride when the letters of his name go up the façade of the Grande Halle: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. They gleam in pride when children troop in, many among them children of exile, of uprootedness. Children troop in, to watch in delight, in wonder, not just the movement, but the maker's name – cousins, sometimes, to their own – and then, one of them whispers, *I could do that too, when I grow up?* And then, wonder gets threaded with possibility. The gleam in the lions' eyes could be mere reflected shivers from the red LED. Maybe. And maybe not. What we do know: the lions remain, they wait, they watch, even in winter. There are no viewers in the Grande Halle, at the Villette, but artists, enablers, technicians still design, rehearse, deliver. In schools. They take their art – pared down, snack-sized – to children. Not perfect. But not gone, either.

Le WTP

Le CePA

a place: a new, portable, part of Paris.
my heart, flowing right into the jugular
teal, tucked above the ribs, just beneath
neat, within its titanium shell – a site
baptised me – with it, indivisible, so,
with no little pride, how superior that
to Tony Stark's Iron Man, poor, poor
entropy in every second film in
the lions' blessings, we'd hit the
cement, spit and dog turd, home
and brash electric scooterists. The
ally themselves with us pedestrians,
till Jaurès, and there, it's time for
Coiffeuse Marie held court, and
before and after the first lockdown
else – with her voice extra bright as she promised and planned to fashion opuses with indigo
on my future stubbled scalp, our laughter wobbly in aftermath. Next door stands Passion
Chocolat, designated best chocolatier of *le nord-est parisien* by Philippe B, who's quite the
maven in these, as in dhrupad, miniatures and other rarefied, matters. Véran, Castex,
Darmanin and our local cops must agree that chocolates are essential services,
for it has remained blessedly open all year, through curfews, lockdowns two
point six, collective surliness and shrunk budgets. Step in, Mr. Cohen,

Why are we here, you may
still want to ask. I could say:
a year and a city are not set
in stone, they flow, they are
both a river, *rivers* that intersect
& uncouple, over and over. But, no,
actually, we are here because this is
where Week One began, week one of
the fifty-two, that is, Mr. Cohen. For I
went to show the lions my brand-new
Port-a-Cath. For when the lions have had
your back once, they prefer to keep
their eyes on you, unblinking, even
twenty years past. And, after all,
the Port-a-Cath is, as the lions insist,
Four inches, perhaps, to the right of
(they tell me). Coloured in silver and
the skin. A silicone bubble, equally
of great power, proclaimed Nico, who
“us” – Titanium Woman, pointing,
substance makes us – indivisible –
thing, prey to rust and arc reactor
the franchise. And from there, with
pavement: kingdom of bitumen and
to turf wars all pandemic with cyclists
cobblestones alongside Canal de l'Ourcq
nonetheless, so it'll be easy going, at least
a quick detour uphill towards Bolivar where
shaved my head three times in six months,
– each time gratis, she wouldn't have it any way

and ask the clientele (snaking up Avenue Simon Bolivar), or just try
the turmeric-leavened marzipan encased in dark chocolate, to see
the creases where Paris still resides. And if you're even halfway
nice, the gentle, russet-haired vendor will slip in little squares
of their latest showstopper, aniseed-flavoured, quite the right
alloy of spice and sweet to brace and inspire cusses at, well,
just about anything — in March it was the dearth of masks,
though between them, Philippe B and Mme C (the caregiver
my former-commanding-officer parent would have paid a
king's ransom to have as quartermaster for his regiment),
had each, with quiet enterprise, found enough FFP2s
for me to ride out the first long months of epirubicin
and cyclophosphamide, unpronounceable galleons
reigning over veins. But I digress, from the path that
leads us downhill and west, across the unwashed sheet
of malachite that's Canal Saint-Martin, from the tip of
Quai de Valmy up till the recently built Caniparc right
beneath the Pont Eugène Varlin, towelette-shaped patch
of earth for hounds and pugs, retrievers, poodles, frolicking
fresh-pawed pups and sedate or tired old-timers, well, pooch-
residents of every persuasion from this side of town. A retreat,
besides, from social distancing for their owners, all too keen (like
your claustrophobic friend) for grounds to breach the curfew.
A retreat, I admit, and eye-analgesic (please forgive the excess
alliteration, but no other term comes to mind) for me on those
hospital-free days. And salve, as well, over time — months and
months of visits — for the Knights of the Order of Nubian
Lions (deputed by the noble beasts, themselves frozen to
their spot at the Villette as the State had never thought of
issuing travel documents or passports). So both Philippe
B & Philippe C, Isa & Nico, Steph & Marielle & Claire,
Sabine & Martine — all bearing, as coat-of-arms, papers
from Hôpital Saint-Louis to brave every lockdown —
have succumbed to the canine charms, although initially
inclined to tell me, *We're really not home, Chenie*. But I'd
known Caniparc was our Millennium Falcon all along.

It's time, you might say, to step up the pace – after all, we haven't all day – so we can switch sides to Quai de Jemmapes where the fragrances from Maison Coët – the boulangerie-pâtisserie on Rue Écluse Saint-Martin – might demand another unplanned deviation (yes, they stayed open through the two point six lockdowns too, with reduced opening hours). I'd recommend every single thing, Mr. Cohen, but the religieuse au café and the pastry named royale might prove particularly tough to forget. While we're here, let's pick up a basket of chouquettes for Dr. B2 and her pain-management troops at Hôpital Saint-Louis, for that is where we are headed next. Dr. B2, who sported tangerine jeans and orange earrings every Wednesday through twenty-four weeks during chemo sessions to match my tonsured Shaolin-warrior-monk-guise, who spun catastrophic puns for solace when the pandemic had made corticoids and acupuncturists scarce. Then, on the ground floor, to the left, we'll find Nurse Rose. She does prefer macarons (if you're planning a treat), but what has taken permanent residency in my mind is how promptly she marooned a long-coveted spring-break to help the nurses in oncology learn to “unfasten” IVs from the chest of her patients with EB, a brood nearly as rare

giant pandas once were. But, I haven't you been here before? Vellefaux at the behest of his Henry (whom we thank more endured more fires and floods Lépine and its fabled flower & yet lost, though it should really in the name of Austerity, chief with molten copperplate skies outside shut hospital doorways after the second-to-last session Afternoons fighting PCCI aka yeast, too, homegrown in May melody rising from the thorax Adam & an unseen, unnamed chemo, prelude to an eight-or-renga Marilyn and I had been last all year – and would then were curses, especially when attacks – and who's better to dragon, comrade of 15 years, by a shade and three-quarters.

Mr. Cohen, to feeling like you say you do, was when he was in Paris, rehearsing, and I couldn't be there — for Palais Garnier might as well have been an ocean away. For if time is a place, Mr. Cohen, a place is people, and my Paris would not be Paris if they were not there. There is more, there's a whole lot more, but, for today, I'll hand you this as amulet: Rachid Ouramdane, son of French-Algerian migrants, will head Théâtre national de Chaillot from April 2021, Mr. Cohen, and the ensign he'll raise to the wall of the site where forty-eight countries signed, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the word *hospitality*. *Hospitality*, which Rachid defines as *openness to the world*, wherever you come from. It is not the best of times, no, no, not by any stretch. We struggle to survive, some each day. But it is not the worst of times, and perhaps those may even be stayed. Meanwhile, there are things the Lions would cheer, as do I.

often for the geometric grace of Place des Vosges & perhaps and epidemics than I have fingers with nails, and toes. At least bird markets, and quietly high – though sorely tested – in that be filed in another, one called everyday miracles, after all the deity of our times. Also, while there, Mr. Cohen, one for both smudged by scarlet thumbs. Philippe B and Sabine K distilled (covid-safety regulations hold sway), alongside a freak summer of chemo. And, now, all the things you will see and hear solely the infamous chemo fog, with homemade dorayaki – courtesy, 2020, when supermarkets in our neck of town had supplies no of the earth. Another, jubilant, one steeped in sunshine, music pianist, at the almost-home that is Shakespeare and Company: so-week pause before the tryst with radiotherapy; the day we'd writing since March – her idea, luminous, for the confinement continue to meter our days right up till now. Just as curative as

and easily as taxing as baby ought to ask first, Mr. Cohen, Built back in 1607 by Claude king, Henri IV or Good King Pont-Neuf), Saint-Louis has as much Paris as Place Louis-list of the things we have not whittling and slashing borne lists: sunsets over Saint-Louis several, while waiting for me sleet storm that broke shortly through my eyes or memory. once again, Isa and Nico, the more – and Mingus in the air, and laughter, with Marilyn & my first Wednesday without read and recorded the vernal we had never dreamt would laughter and poetry or music faced with daily, new, photon cuss with than my own fire-and angrier, usually, than me The closest I came, perhaps,