



London Healing

by Lev Raphael
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Baudelaire wrote that "travel teaches bitter knowledge" and that seemed to be the lesson I was learning when a dreamed-for guest teaching stint in London turned nightmarish very quickly.

I was scheduled for two six-week classes in a summer abroad program sponsored by Michigan State University where I was a visiting assistant professor. The classes in creative writing and Gilded Age literature would be small, and I had long dreamed about teaching in one of my favorite European cities. Guest speakers would include noted authors like Miranda Seymour and Val McDermid. I was also teaching one of my favorite authors, Henry James, who loved London, and the combination of all those factors was exciting.

But 48 hours before I left, I injured my knee at the gym, doing something simple: stepping over a bench in the locker room. The surgeon diagnosing my torn meniscus said that I could travel to London as long as I avoided stairs and wore a knee brace. He knew how much the trip meant to me and said the surgery could wait for six weeks.

It was a new and bizarre experience getting wheel-chaired through airport security in Detroit and I didn't enjoy being stared at, but I got over it. The plus side was the speed and gentleness TSA staff treated me with.

On arrival in England, though, I had to wait a long time for a wheelchair and started feeling like an abandoned parcel.

The address I eventually pulled up to in my cab from the airport looked like something out of *Masterpiece Theater* show: it was in one of those lovely, white, pillared Regency-era terraces which promised ease and comfort.

But those first weeks abroad were rough. The brace was very uncomfortable, medication didn't ease my pain enough, the streets were noisy even at night, and I had trouble sleeping. London was suffering under a nasty heat wave and the Pimlico flat had no air conditioning. My choice was either stifling at night with closed windows to mute the noise or trying to sleep with open windows and hope, vainly, that ear plugs would cushion the street clamor.

Worse than that, the flat was a duplex (which I didn't know in advance), so I had to hobble up and down a narrow, wearying staircase more times than I could count every day. My cell phone always turned out to be one flight up or one flight down when it rang. The flat was on the building's top floor, too, which made it hotter, and opening windows for cross ventilation somehow created a wind fierce enough to blow papers off my worktable. That wind actually unraveled the paper towels on their rack in the kitchen and ripped the bamboo window shade from its frame. The mess looked like the work of a poltergeist.

There was a small table fan, but it wasn't very effective: it represented more the idea of cooling off than the reality.

Likewise, Skype calls to my husband did not make up for being away from home and away from him. I missed everything we did as a couple, from meals to walking the dog to just surveying the quotidian. And sleeping alone was its own special torment after so many years together. I missed his ever-calming presence, his scent, and the ease with which he drifted off every night.

Because my flat wasn't near a Tube station with an escalator or elevator, I needed car service to and from Regents College in its verdant setting of Regents Park. Thanks to the 90-degree heat, the black cars were baking inside when they showed up and the drivers were averse to air conditioning. I had to plead a possible migraine to get them to turn it on and turn it to high, because they always set it to the lowest possible whisper of cool air. And cracked their windows to avoid catching a chill, I suppose.

The flat at first glance looked plush with its gilded wall sconces, display china on the marble mantelpiece, and walls covered with lavishly-framed architectural prints of vases, gardens and mansions—but that was just the surface.

Internet service was spotty there and my phone also overheated more than once. I joked with my students that the flat was something out of a Stephen King novel. The shower door had no handle on the inside which made exits tricky; the heated towel bar had been left on by the owner and I burned myself backing into it my first day; the flat was randomly filled with heavily-fringed throw rugs on top of carpeting and it was so easy to trip on them that I actually did that one sleepless night.

As I was about to hit the floor on my bad knee, I twisted to avoid that and slammed my hand into the way-too-solid work table. My hand started to swell up instantly and I was soon on my way to the nearest hospital's emergency room which was filled with empty chairs and way too much fluorescent lighting. I was in so much pain when I got there that I passed out for a while, and I screamed when a doctor finally got to me and palpated the hand.

"My," she said, sounding like Lady Mary in *Downton Abbey*, "that seems exquisitely painful." I left a few hours later with a cast, pain medication, and wondering what could possibly happen next.

My students had been very understanding of my inability to take stairs or socialize with them as much as the other professor on the program. But when I showed up in class the next morning with that cast and looking haggard, one of them said, "Please don't die."

On top of everything, our drab, cinderblock classroom wasn't air conditioned and we had to cope with demolition noise nearby on campus and even band practice.

I hit bottom, more depressed than I had ever been in my life. As an experienced teacher I was able to focus well in class, but after each teaching day I just wanted to hide in the wasteland of my flat. Eating out at a pub nearby and being served by cheerful staff was a brief mood lift, but that wasn't enough in the scale to come even remotely close to lightening my dark load of physical and emotional pain. Skype sessions with my therapist back in Michigan didn't really help and attending a recital at a jewel-like Victorian church nearby where they sang a Vaughan Williams mass made me cry.

Then one Sunday morning four weeks after I arrived, I decided to venture to the Tate Britain museum, which was actually very close to my flat. I had to take a cab there because the walk would have hurt too much. I arrived at 10 a.m. when the museum opened, finding just a handful of people waiting to get in; they quickly scattered on their own missions. I had come to see the famed pre-Raphaelite collection — and was disappointed to discover those paintings were away on loan.

I hobbled around the galleries in a foul mood until I found myself in a roomful of Henry Moore sculptures. I knew Moore's work from books and having seen some statues in New York, but here was a whole family of them, so to speak — and they were all mine. I wandered from one to the other, solitary and awed. Then I sat down near my favorite statue in the room, a reclining blue nude, and just admired its enigmatic beauty:



I don't know how long my reverie lasted. In all my years of museum-going in New York, Chicago, D.C., Paris, Berlin, Munich, Bruges, Florence and other cities, I couldn't recall ever having quite so much time to simply revel in a great work of art alone. The tranquility of this cool, aquamarine figure radiated throughout the room and worked on me like a series of Chopin nocturnes.

Surprisingly contented and happy, I eventually moved along as other visitors entered, and was dumbstruck in the next hall. Off in the distance was a remarkable sculpture unlike anything I had ever seen. The closer I came to it, the more amazed I was. I'd heard of Jacob Epstein before, but had never even seen a photo of his remarkable 1941 sculpture *Jacob and the Angel*.

The massive work is carved from one giant piece of alabaster and with the sun shining down through skylights, parts of the statue were translucent; other parts glowed and the whole thing appeared to be shimmering with frozen movement. The *Genesis* story in which Jacob wrestles with an angel all night and emerges with a new name, Israel, and a limp, has always been one of my favorites because it's so mysterious and otherworldly.

The lustrous statue radiated powerful, erotic mystery in form and texture. And despite its size, it felt strangely weightless, even timeless. I circled the statue more than once without anyone nearby, feeling as if it were my own gift or message. I strained to catch a glimpse of Jacob's face. When I did, I read surrender there and peace. The struggle was over and the angel was holding him up. Unless it was the reverse?

However the artist meant us to see his work, I felt embraced both by Jacob and the angel: warmed, calmed, sustained.

It felt ironic to be limping away myself when I couldn't take in any more of the statue's mysteries. But I was infinitely lighter in spirit, and that day marked a real turning point for me in London, because I started sleeping better, felt more relaxed, and was even able to tolerate my pain.

For days afterwards, I carried around inside me the feelings of transcendence and awe I felt at Tate Britain. I may have arrived there feeling battered and even broken, but I felt much closer to being whole when I left.

Had the statue conquered me or made me surrender? Perhaps a bit of both.

Whatever the case, I was able to sleep more normally, I felt reborn and the depression was lifting. I started doing what I had imagined would be daily fare before the trip: play-going and visiting as many other museums as I had time for, no longer feeling damaged and quite alone.