

Douglas Oliver / THE ALBATROSS AND THE GOOSE

from Whisper Louise — work in progress, a trans-historical comparison of two memoirs: those of the 19th century “Red Virgin” of the 1871 Paris Commune, Louise Michel, and the 20th century memoirs of the author

Shortly after her trial, Louise and other women comrades were taken by cell wagon to the Auberive centre in the Marne. The snow fell thick, the cold was atrocious, the passengers inadequately clothed, half-starved; Louise, say the hagiographers, kept up everyone's morale, she herself privately despairing unto death. On arrival, they hurried towards a warm stove but were thrust back by a guard, a foretaste of the ill treatment they could expect at Auberive, Louise privately despairing unto death.

Strong bonds linked these women: Marie Chiffon, a lingerie worker, who became a nurse during the Commune and, it was said, was an armed combattant during the Bloody Week: now, she brandished the prison number on her arm at the brutish guards and shouted “*Vive la Commune!*”; Adèle Desfossés the wife of Viard, a Commune member who fled to Switzerland; the Créole Victorine Gorget; and Elisabeth de Ghi, who, like the gentle Blanche Arnold, was to die on the voyage home from New Caledonia. Nathalie Lemel, had even more celebrity than Louise, for she had run a famous soup kitchen, been a leader of the Commune's League of Women, fought at the Place Pigalle women's barricade, and, not wanting to survive the end of the Grand Dream, had shut herself indoors and set fire to her home. The police, arriving to arrest her, saved her life, reports one of Louise's biographers, Fernand Planche.

At her trial, Marie Chiffon had shouted at her judges: “I defy you to condemn me to death, you are too cowardly to kill me.” With justice, the inflammatory journalist Felix Pyat claimed Marie as another Louise Michel, “less known, illiterate, more of the people, even more courageous.”

“Less known, illiterate.” Whereas Louise had learnt aristocratic manners as an illegitimate child in a noble chateau. Revolution

creates its own hierarchies, whether of intelligence, competence, or powerful incompetence — the kind of thought that during this long crossing drove Louise finally towards anarchism. Thus I have the names of the other women but what they did I don't know. Louise bore the number 2182; if more than two thousand women preceded her, how unsung are their stories!

On Tuesday 24 August, 1873, at six a.m., Louise and her 18 fellows were taken to Langres and transferred into another cell wagon. Six cutlers came from their workshop to doff their caps. Diderot's father, a Langres cutler, would not have approved.

That night they slept in the cell wagon parked in Paris. A day later, they were held at La Rochelle before the *Comète* ferried them out to the *Virginie*, at anchor off the port of Rochefort. A fleet of little ships crowded with supporters accompanied them, handkerchiefs waving.

They climbed on board the old sailing frigate, built in 1848 and heaved out of the scrap heap to transport insurrectionists. The Admiralty had a job to find a willing skipper, but Captain Launay knew the boat and needed to live down his previous voyage when he had unknowingly allowed a nun and her confessor to copulate beneath a spy-hole shared by delighted crew members.

Just the other day, the French legislature agreed to constitutional changes for New Caledonia, giving that old prison colony, one of the last "colonies" left in the world, a chance of independence after more than a century of struggle — and we shall find Louise in that struggle, at the beginning of it.

Louise and Rochefort are bound there now, into exile, as the creaky old vessel turns on its keel and heads to sea.

Exile is a strange word, its root being *ex-sal(ire)*, or "to leap outwards." It has two principal meanings: to be thrust out of the nation by judicial or other sentence; or to leave the nation voluntarily for a long time. The first is the grandiose fate of Louise; the second is the minor story of my middle age.

Not knowing this second meaning, critics scoffed at an editor who wrote of me as a "poet-in-exile," though admittedly such a title is far too high-blown for the non-dramatic events of my own life.

Back in the eighties, all I took from the family home were blue

lightweight suitcases collapsing with the weight of books. And self-blame I shall never shed for actions to which I still don't see an alternative. As Louise says, "a single, isolated life is no longer interesting." Unless, I add, it somehow becomes a window.

Simply, I write better from a standpoint outside Britain. But I have not "left" Britain.

Like Rochefort, I am one who resigns jobs and even countries in order to retain a supposed purity. This is not a trait I admire.

Gave up journalism because I could no longer stand the harm it did. Went to Essex University at last, age 33, went there for its poetry and radicalism, and took a first because I'd done all the reading already (at 16, ashamed at flunking school, I'd fiercely kept up private study). Gave up an Essex lectureship after two years and went part-time to write a misbegotten novel in a small coastal town near the university, but got starved of mental stimulation there. Former students conducted bitter, powerless political discussions in the pubs: easy just to hate Thatcher and cheer on the doomed miners' strike.

Yet . . . Brightlingsea . . . 7,000 population clustered round a muddy sailing estuary, warm, friendly, neighbours caring for the elderly, all the clichés, intense local loyalties, square dances, pantomimes, dinner parties, school events. A bad planning decision would bring 800 people out in protest. This model community suited Jan's life more than mine; she taught the local children. I liked best sailing up the estuary towards Colchester in a tiny dinghy with a mended mast: we called it "Penance," formerly "Carry Me."

"If you were in Paradise, you'd walk out of it," my elder daughter Kate said.

Could I have written good poetry in Brightlingsea? Not my urban kind of poetry. Well in England, then, in Scotland? Not my kind. I'm not English. I'm not really Scottish either. A cultural vagabond.

Had a chance for a new career teaching English and literature; it meant returning to France. My marriage couldn't withstand the move. Jan had too much to lose and I had all the fault.

A yearning, a lean, a gulf, saloon chairs slide across wooden decking, a stasis, a shudder, a grinding on, the Sealink night ferry from England nods its great nod forwards into a gale. A yearning

again. The chairs reverse their slide. I am on my own in the passenger lounge, wondering what I'm doing there. Outside the windows the waves rear mountainously. It's four a.m., the toilets stink of vomit, all heads are bowed on the dull tables surrounded by bench seats. My life opens at its worst page, like the desperate lines I had written in caps in an old Brightlingsea notebook:

EACH SMALL SETBACK REVERBERATES BEYOND ITS TRUE SCOPE.
ROOT OUT THE ENEMY FROM MY SOUL.

A deep-sworn self-vow I didn't have the talent to keep, lines now blotted with sea water. And so others have been friends of mine in casual night-time intimacies as meaningless as this night-long conversation with a hollow-eyed divorcee on the night ferry.

She wore a shadowy white suit with black piped lapels and worked at Rhone-Poulenc; I had no idea why I was still talking to her as dawn rose.

Seeking signs of a wider politics in panic auguries of gulls over green-haired crests of waves, flat sea glints from a kitchen mincer. The mind sending out flight lines.

Yes, the lowest time, teaching for a living but scouting round Paris bars with journalist friends, and returning to England once a month. It all lasted six years until my life started to restabilise, become rich again, a slightly shorter period than Louise's far-grandier exile. She never restabilised: she was to find fame instead.

I have never had to live through such darkness as Louise sank into at Auberive — behind her, memories of massacres, of friends tortured and executed, of the deep tragedy of Ferré, and of her own privations. But I do know, like her, how you can dress a bright linen over a bad mood and live a while like that, everything real hidden underneath.

Like her, I could go out on a ship's deck, feel imprisoned on it, yet let my spirit go out to the waters and be in a sense happy, numb inside because I had left behind people I truly loved but who, at the last minute, would not follow. My own mother, whom I idolise now, thought me wicked to leave. I may have been at that time. I am not wicked about it now. I am no longer imprisoned; the family members have recovered in their various ways; I have Alice to be (fairly) poor with, all of which is the richness.

That sea is always fairly near
under the rails of night ferries
swaying with unsteady thoughts, blackening in crisis,
roughening with time or fortune, drawn on
by inkless nibs, as if the written surface
were integral with liquid rooms of memory
distorted in the currents undersea.

"As the seed contains the tree, every life from its beginning
contains what it will be, what it will become despite everything,"
Louise writes in her *Memoirs*. I pity her and her fame.

Ah well, Louise and Rochefort are at sea, as I say.

She had always loved the ocean, though she had never yet seen
it. She, queen of the *déjà vu*. The first toys her grandfather made for
her were wooden sailing ships:

Oh! how when still a child I have seen white sails
Pass in my evening dreams across sea-swells.
I always saw one which under the stars, alone,
Seemed a great white bird against a black horizon.

My grandfather told me: "We will make your boat
Beautiful, make it from heart of oak,
For it's a frigate."

But grandfather didn't make that frigate from heart of oak,
though his cruder toy ships seemed to sail on a round stone, near
red roses, bees flying around the masts. It was on the great waves,
after the fall of the Commune, that Louise "recognised" the *Virginie*
as the ship in the dream.

I have spoken of the beginning of certain circumstances which made
Edgar Poe and Baudelaire dream about the outlines of strange things; I'll
say little about it; perhaps even the history of the *Virginie*, sailing fully-
rigged such as I saw it in dream will be the single page in this genre.

If you can trust her:

I say *perhaps*, for often one gets excited while writing and one goes, one goes, amid the memories . . . without thinking even about what one is writing. It is on those occasions above all that the ends of phrases stay in the pen. One has always gone far, really far away from the line one is writing.

As a young teacher, she had dared the authorities to deport her to Cayenne, like the 1848 revolutionaries. Now she smells the waves' bitter tang, she hears the "wind-organ" in the sails, the sailors bustle into their manoeuvres, the whistle pipes for raising anchor. It is for her a mighty harmony of teamwork, a miniature Commune of chanting as the crew haul in the anchor rhythmically.

The cable grinds, the canvas slips from the grasp of sailors on the yards as they untie the reefs, the wind bellies the topsails outwards, the ship is still gradually turning on itself to leave port. Louise is exalted.

She is shut up in a barred cage along with 21 women and, in neighbouring cages some 125 male deportees, including about 60 Algerian freedom fighters. The tall Créole, Victorine Gorget, would snarl at the two nuns detailed to serve the women prisoners: "Ah! Believe me, sisters, I am not here for having strung some pearls. I damn well shot them out of rifles at those Versaillais toads, you better believe it!"

For discipline is light: Louise will be allowed out for promenades. Rochefort, instantly and revoltingly sea-sick, will remain on deck and take his minimum repasts at the captain's table.

Before departure, Edmond Adam's wife told Captain Launay that Rochefort was bound to be released once he got to New Caledonia: a good report might help the skipper's chances of promotion. The only person punished that whole trip will be a warder who has been rude to Rochefort. It's on the other prison-vessels that you hear of manacles, whippings, slave treatment. It pays to travel with an aristocratic prisoner.

The real friendship between Rochefort and Louise began on this voyage.

"Look at the pretty wedding basket that Mac-Mahon has given

me!" And Louise showed him two skirts, a dress in Indian cloth and a bonnet. Her prisoner's allowance. They exchanged poems lamenting the corpses in Paris, the city still smoking in memory,

Rochefort's poetry ("To my neighbour on the starboard aft side") was a distinguished piece of journalist's doggerel:

A seal bobbed up, the sea was calm,
how much my morning mind remembers:
it was bald Rouher with his slimy palm.
And the sharks that sailors try to catch
Look to me like an excellent match
For Commission of Pardon members.

They had both refused the sham of appealing for pardon. Louise responded with "Louise Michel to Rochefort": "Gaze from the waves to the stars/The dawn of wandering lights . . . O ship sail on, sail on! . . . Open your wings, o cyclones/Let us cross the blessed abyss." That kind of "O! O!" stuff.

The old vessel, buffeted by gales, called at Palma Island in the Canaries — Louise busy at her notebook there, thought it might be the site of the lost Atlantis —, then skulked across to Brazil to look for favourable winds. For his fellow prisoners, Rochefort spent 2.50 francs on 500 oranges bought from canoes, a protection against scurvy. They turned back from Brazil across the vastness to the Cape of Good Hope, as icebergs fit for Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* floated by.

Louise tried her hand at a Baudelaire "Voyage" genre of poetry, but it was the albatross from Baudelaire and Coleridge that came to haunt her. The sailors were catching these princely birds on fish hooks, then hanging them upside down to let the blood drip clear of the perfect white feathering. "So sadly, they raised their head as long as they could, rounding their swan necks, to prolong for an instant their miserable agony, opening their large eyes with black lids with an expression of horror."

Though a prisoner, she protested loudly against this barbarity and the captain ordered it stopped.

As with animals, so with people. When her fellow women cold-

shouldered Mme Leroy, who was rumoured to have denounced Commune member Urbain, Louise took her part. Rochefort said Louise found all sorts of excuses for everyone.

Several warders, promised land holdings in New Caledonia if they were married, had wedded prostitutes. Even modern historians find this amusing. Neither now nor in later prison life did Louise find prostitutes funny: she had already insisted they should be allowed to fight for the Commune; she made them her friends, learnt their argot, tiresomely inserted it into her prose, and took damaged emotions for pure ones.

In ferment here was her revolutionary anarchism, a scorn for all power. Of stronger constitution herself, she tended Nathalie Lemel in her sea-sickness, and the conversations she had then confirmed her growing disaste for power.

She sought its origin in childhood when she'd seen a decapitated white goose with gouts of blood on its feathers, drunkenly continuing to walk with bleeding, raised neck while the head lay in a corner, eyes closed.

It formed the basis for her concern for animals, such as the albatrosses and her cats, and then too for her horror at capital punishment. Still in her childhood, they executed a man from a nearby village who had killed his father. She felt a disgust parallel to her feeling for the goose. Stories of torture heard at family knitting circles kept these memories alive, and her grandmother had trouble persuading the child to eat meat.

Louise declares in her *Memoirs* that, rather than torture animals to study their physiology, it would be better to study the functions of the heart in the human beast.

She thinks nothing of ourselves survives after death, just like a flame after the candle has been blown out (O Wystan, the cat! O Diana, the princess! More "O!"s.)

Still, if there were eternity, like the immensity before and after us, and if the part that thinks may pass into the unknown currents of electricity, and become absorbed like the elements of a body returned to material elements, it would not be a miracle. Visible or invisible, it would only be

nature still, and I have often wondered why one imagines that this electricity, conscious or not, passing to invisible crucibles, would prove God more than the birth of organisms which swarm upon Earth.

In another version of these thoughts, expressed in a modern, equally pretentious scientific language, I subscribe to Louise's speculations. Individual mind, as a discrete creation in space and time, may take part in that great mystery of whether or not space-time disappears after time's arrow has passed on.

Stupid or not, naive or not, such thoughts affect my political views, as they affected Louise's. Human dignity seems such a fragile, unimportant thing compared to any wider sense of significance.

From my evenings at that knitting circle dates a sentiment of revolt that I have also often felt again.

The peasants raised the corn, but they always had no bread! An old woman told how, with her four children, during the bad year (I think one calls a year this when the monopolisers have famished the country), neither her, nor her husband, nor her children had eaten every day; they had nothing left to sell, they only possessed the clothes on their backs; two of their children were dead, they thought it was because of hunger! Those who had corn did not want to give them credit, not even a *measure of oats to make a bit of bread*. But you had to resign yourself! she used to say. Everyone can't eat bread every day. She had prevented her husband from beating up someone who had refused them credit at *double interest over a year*, when her children were dying. But two others had resisted, they were working for the same person whom her husband wanted to *knock down*. The usurer scarcely ever paid, but it was best that poor people suffered what they could not prevent! . . .

When she said all that, with her calm air, I was hot in the eyes with rage, and I told her: You should have let your husband do it! He was right!

Now, on ship, with the failure of the Commune behind her, these thoughts came at last to fruition. With nothing but sails, sky, water, and horizon, her thought had immensity for topic.

She meditated on how her friends in the Commune feared so

much to act cruelly that they could only throw away their lives. She became convinced that honest people in power would be as incapable as the dishonest were harmful. Liberty should never ally itself with any kind of power. If a revolution formed a government, it could only be a step, and that a deceiving one which could not open all the doors of progress. It would chain a new regime of institutions to the past world;

The ecstatic cosmology, the vast horizons, now enter her discussion:

I saw that the laws of attraction which endlessly carry numberless spheres towards new suns between the two eternities of the past and the future, came also to preside over the destinies of beings in the eternal progress which draws them towards a true ideal, always growing. I am therefore an anarchist because anarchy alone will bring human happiness, and because the highest idea that can be seized by human intelligence is anarchy while waiting for a summum to appear on the horizon.

Only anarchy can render humanity conscious, only it can make them free. For any man arriving in power, the State is himself and he is ready to defend it like a dog its bone. To try to seize hold of any other political principle is like trying to haul yourself out of an abyss by grasping crumbling stones and yielding clumps of grass.

It was time that the real ideal, greater, more beautiful than all the fictions which have preceded it, shows itself clearly enough for the disinherited masses not to spill their blood any more for deceiving chimeras.

That's why I am an anarchist.

So, meditating these thoughts, she saw the long voyage draw to an end, as the little group of islands that were to be her prison home reared on the horizon and they endlessly drew close enough to see the arid crests, the reddened Mont d'Or, and the steep volcanic gorges.

At last, they steered through a breach in the double rampart of coral which encircles New Caledonia and dropped anchor off

Nouméa, whose seven blue hills under the blue Pacific sky, she compared to ancient Rome.

She conceived herself as half-savage, well pleased with these deserts and extinct cones ready at any moment to burst into flame.

Immediately a political problem. The governor wanted the women to have better lodging in Bourrail, not on the fortified peninsula of Ducos to which Versailles had, in fact, sentenced them. (It's thought a prudish priest thought promiscuity too likely — were they not communards? — if the women were housed near the men.) It was Nathalie Lemel who conducted the fiery protest:

"We do not ask for nor will we accept any favours, and we will go to live with our co-deportees in the fortified place that the law decreed for us."

"But at the moment when I choose for you another place of internment you must only obey."

"We will so little obey you that, if we do not go today to rejoin our friends on the peninsula, then this evening at precisely 8 o'clock Louise and I will throw ourselves into the sea."

"That's enough ladies; you will go to the Ducos peninsula."

When they disembarked, Rochefort and the other men were already there and that meant a round of parties in the makeshift huts.

As a good journalist, Rochefort had invited the prize guest to his party, Daoumi, a Canak from Sifu, dressed in European garb, with a tall hat — which disfigured his proud, savage head — and leather gloves on his large hands. (He had been badly advised.)

As this lion of a man had nothing to do, Louise got him to sing a war song, while feeding him goat cheese on castor oil plant leaves. He sang full-voiced in quarter tones, which Louise in her cosmic enthusiasm thought must have been learnt from the noise of tropical cyclones, just as "the Arabs have taken theirs from the simoon."

War Song

Very beautiful, very good
Red sky!
Red axe,
Red fire,
Red blood,
Hail goodbye
Men, — brave ones, —

Ka kop,
Méa moa,
Méa ghi,
Méa iep,
Méa rouia,
Anda dio poura,
Mateh malch kachmas!

Louise retained only this couplet, full of the colour red which so attracted her imagination. The decapitated goose and the tortured albatross had lent her not only their pathos but also their blood.