

## Louis(e)

I've learnt much of the sea in the past years. It's a massive bowl of salt and water with a detestable propensity to penetrate clothes, chafe the skin between thighs, beneath arms, and to move deeper to corrode the heart.

Within the sea dwells a population of wildly different creatures, already more ghost than sea monster when hauled into the ether. The air is a poison to their system, just as water is to the human lung. I've watched them gasp their last, their silvered flanks heaving. Labillardière, Delahaye and the fool surgeon, Renard, pick through them for specimens worthy of examination. There are bonito, winged fish, and once a great shark with its grimacing gash of a mouth and teeth like rows of sharpened gears. It fought valiantly; the crew jubilant at the acquisition of its last breath. It sagged across the deck, blood streaming from its jaws, smaller, as all things are, in death. I'd swept my hand over its scarred skin which looked smooth but was rough bark. The sailors told stories of sharks crazed with blood, thrashing pink-stained water with tails so muscular they can kill a man with a single stroke.

Bourdenet, the surly canonier, spoke of watching a group of sailors who'd had the misfortune to capsize their pirogue. They'd clung to its side and watched a shark circle for some time before it chose its victim. It plucked him away, a cabin boy no more than fifteen, and played with his punctured body while he screamed for assistance from his fellows and, when that was not forthcoming, from God. It tossed his limp and bleeding body like a kitten with a ball before sinking beneath the surface. Labillardière listened with interest, his perfunctory response:

'Carcharodon carcharias, jagged toothed one.'

I am on a ship. Perhaps in your mind it rises out of the clouds like a child's drawing, a crayon image with myself, a pale shadow, standing on deck. I can tell you the ship's dimensions: 112 feet by 28 and, depending on your original assumptions, your drawing may shrink or swell. I can tell you the number of decks and masts: three; I can describe the smells: a putrescent blend of stagnant water, noxious gases, a hint of gunpowder, hot bread and an acrid underlay of a hundred unwashed souls. With a blistered finger I'll nudge the drawing off the page, over your floor, across the threshold and beyond the edge of your known world.

I was born in 1754 and as such I am long dead. I imagine that you, the reader, are living. No sense in arguing the distinction between these two conditions. Defining them is a struggle. Once upon a time it was a simple matter, you breathed, therefore you lived. You ceased to, you died. But it also seems a place exists in which you can be both.

I fell asleep one day. When I woke it was three years earlier and I stood outside myself and watched as I flailed through living. Everything was an imprint of a woodcut of a time already lived. But I lived it again. Not from inside, but beside myself. I observe all those things I once did, but with no power to make change. I've wrapped my cold fingers around my warm ones, tried to peel them from the pages of the purser's record but to no effect. There are two of me: the one who chooses to interact with the crew as little as possible and the one who, through no choice of her own, cannot. Looking down I do not see myself, nor do I require sustaining with food or drink, I cannot lift even the most wizened apple from the barrel. I can only assume I am no longer living.

I'm always at some small distance from the woman I once called *myself* – Louise. She does the same things I did those four years ago. Indeed she repeats them with such infinite appreciation of every flinch, every stutter, that I admit she is more real than I. She lives in the very same moments and, like I once did, has no concept of the events laid out before her. Having already lived them I feel some superiority over her in these matters. 'Watch out - Willaumez!' I hiss in her ear, but she doesn't look up, not till it's too late and I must watch her grind through the words with a wearying repetition. I cannot always recall the sequence of events and often amuse myself with guessing her next misstep.

How you are reading my words is beyond my understanding. Perhaps some freak of wind, some fold in time, some breach in the believable has led to this spillage of ink. I wrote a journal while at sea, but it was a miserable thing. Frightened as I was that it would be discovered, I hid it in the split silk lining of my carpet bag. To begin with it revealed little of my thoughts, and none of my gender. Instead it was a discourse on the sciences. But as time passed I desired a friend, and I found one in its blank pages. Nothing of the journal remains. I cast it overboard in Batavia before it could be seized by D'Auribeau and its words unveil me. I had much to hide.

So Louise stands on the deck of the *Recherché*, a pale shadow, but there's a still paler version beside her. I am my own ghost. I haunt myself. Even now I watch. I stand at the rail, searching the dark night sea. My living face beside me a hard white circle. There's a soft tearing of hunger, a sting of salt water along the line of her shin where the skin is broken. The muscles in her neck and jaw are taut and there's a tight band around her skull. I know too what she's thinking. Not just because I thought it before: this close I hear the words.

*It is folly to cling to wood no more substantial than twigs amidst the roar of a sea gone wild and many fathoms from home. I'm one small slip of foot to a long, slow descent. I teeter on the brink of sure calamity and find a quiet place where fear has no entry. I see all possibilities, in the end none are so terrible I cannot bear to see them come to pass. There's*

*a moment, unbearably sweet, where dying is not to be fought, but to be found. That slow sinking, the gentlest release. I would not be missed.*

A cloying self-pity. I find, as always, that my patience for my past self has long gone. I watch a swaying lamp cast an elongated shadow of an officer across the shining deck. A monster is made of his hat and head; disproportionally large it supports an ever-decreasing accumulation of limbs till it ends at the dainty feet, so determinedly attached to the soles of Lieutenant Willaumez. Louise sees him too, she loosens her grip on the rigging and her own shadow is absorbed into that of the hold and she is below and in her cramped cabin before his figure passes.

But I stay and watch. His hair is wetted to his cheek; the light from his lamp illuminates the amber coloured glass of his iris as it strikes across his face. He pauses to stare at the hatch. I'm uncomfortable to be so far from her, my flesh. It is always thus. Some dark umbilical attaches us. But I resist the urge to follow. Instead I launch myself at him, invent a gravitational pull on fleshless limbs and spring, cling. I stare into his eyes into the back of him, where those grinding cogs are crushing Louise. My tongue slides insolent across his cheek. He looks away, oblivious it seems, yet his left hand rises to press against his right cheek, as though to wipe at the unkind slick of my tongue. I roar silent laughter. But he walks on and I cannot bear another moment of distance between Louise and I. I fall away, shadowless and grim.

In this strange death I am a paper cut-out. I follow each step Louise takes with a faded step of my own. She does not seek my eyes, but if she were to catch sight of me it would be to see me smirk. Louise knows nothing of me. Who she will be in death is a mystery to her. I know all of her. And she is not enough.

## **A Small piece of France**

### **26th day of September 1791**

A frowsy woman with red skinned hands stares at the diminutive figure not ten feet away; there's something odd about him. It's not just that he's stood in the same place shuffling his feet and staring at his sleeve like a madman for some time, but his shoulders are thin and narrow, and the set of his body, hunched and defensive. She doubts he'd have the nous to lift a sack of potatoes and he stands out like a horn on a duck's head, what with his ill-fitting clothes and awkward stance. An excise man, new at the job and nervous? But what was he doing here? Everyone knows these ships were on the king's own mission. Or perhaps - and she glances at her sons playing on the dock metres away - he may be looking for untended children. Children disappear and while all expect them to be found floating in the harbour,

slipped from a wharf and drowned, others tell a darker tale. Whoever he is, he won't be having her boys. She'd sell her potatoes and be gone.

A grey woollen thread protrudes from the end of the sleeve like a curious worm. It's coarse and filaments create a thin field around it that she rolls between a gloved thumb and forefinger. The bicorne is pulled down over her eyes. Terror has seized her, she's staring at the wool, unable to see beyond it to the crowd of masts and rigging floating in and out of the thick fog, or the steam from men's throats as they make their dragon like way down the dock with sacks over shoulders or rolling pièces *da 4* filled with water. There's the tang of sea and burning coal, a flock of gulls wheel, their chorus as shrill as fisherwomen. Her feet shuffle against the worn timbers in a pretence of cold, but her cheeks are hectic. Two tow-headed lads of nine or ten play marbles with the black balls of goat droppings. A woman, possibly their mother, stands some distance from them with red-skinned hands selling red skinned potatoes. There is something vaguely offensive about the similarity. Potatoes, once condemned as pig food, have become an unappreciated staple. Bread's still scare, and the woman is doing brisk trade.

*I am a resolute type, she thinks to herself, a quality that has stood me in good stead.*

I stir from where I pool at her feet. I know what I once looked like, I've seen myself in mirrors many times, yet I see Louise from vantage points a mirror cannot. My changeling self, her masculinity tied on like a cloak, affecting a pose, legs apart, arms across her chest, she is a different creature than I recall myself to have been.

Yesterday she'd visited a café while masquerading as a man. As mad an escapade as Olympe de Gorges's. Louise had revelled in the brief excitement, not seeming to perceive the magnitude of her risk. There could be no faltering in her performance and as performances go, I could see now, from my superior vantage, it was a poor thing. The deception of men's clothing, unplucked brows, trimmed lashes and a thrusting chin create an ensemble of awkwardness. Louise stands too stiffly. She's petite, nothing can change that, and she's stored too much faith in her strong nose, believing it will counteract the effect of a stubbleless chin. I never did appear my age and Louise hopes to take on the looks of a man not yet full-grown. She does not know, as I do, just how far she has failed.

The potato woman is staring at her surreptitiously, even Louise feels it. In response she rocks back on her heels, a parody of manliness. So much depends on this pretence. It's a ruse she must maintain for several years on board a ship designed for sixty men but carrying a hundred. They'll be cramped, living cheek by jowl. She thinks she can succeed with the confidence and panache for which she is known - but she won't. I can't help but watch my once self and pity her for her credulity, ridicule her recklessness.

Before I left France, I thought of nothing but escape; once I had, I thought of nothing but my return. Here Louise is, frightened and excited in equal parts, yearning for the ship to leave

shore, to leave all manner of things behind her. Yet once at sea France will be a sun too bright. She won't dare look back lest it blind her. The thought of it will be a warmth to bask in.

Is it always that we must desire only what's left behind or what stretches out before us? Why is it that the small space between thumb and forefinger we're destined to tramp, that muddy middle ground of the present is the meanest estate?

The Recherche and Esperance are destined for the Pacific Ocean, the territory of men like Byron, Bougainville, Wallis, Carteret and Cook. I'd read the accounts of their voyages, where savages lurk as though dredged from nightmares. There are the shipboard perils of strife, petty rivalries and the scourge of scurvy. But these seem trivial compared to the ever present danger of discovery and disgrace. Louise stands on the dock and trembles at the unknown, I stand beside her and stare at the ship I know so intimately. Its sails once more white, its hull freshly studded with iron nails. Across its deck walk men Louise is yet to love or detest and who I already know too well, and do. I'd spent several days now leashed invisible to her side. No amount of imploring, of battering against her had resulted in any sense of reciprocal awareness. Despite this, I hiss:

'Marie Louise Victoire Girardin, do not leave the shores of France, do not go!'

Louise tugs hard on the woollen thread and it gives. She stares past the frayed thread and spots a smooth grey stone on the dock. She scoops it up and deposits it in a pocket. Clamping her fingers around it and says to herself, 'a small piece of France.'

The red skinned woman watches as Louise walks up the gangway. Perhaps she will need to describe him to the maréchaussée should a child go missing. She measures him with her eyes, and it is as he turns at the rail to look back that it dawns on her that he isn't an excise man, or a molester of children. There, in the bones of the face, in the shape and carriage of the neck, too slender for a man, a woman! She watches as Julien, the sailor with half an ear and a reputation among the whores for owning a member of prodigious length, approaches the strange woman to speak.

A customer, a woman in an unfashionable hat distracts her, asks her price, and she gives it. When she looks again, the strange woman is gone. A woman on a ship, that's one for the books. Perhaps she's the commander's mistress, or belongs to one of the officers. If she's impersonating a man the next years will be difficult. Sailors are a canny lot, and unforgiving. Well, good luck to her. She bares her greyed teeth in a grin and throws in an extra potato for the woman with the bad hat. She wonders how long it will take those on board to realise the deception; it hadn't taken her longer than an hour.

The sailor with half an ear, the ragged edges of which appear to have been nibbled by fish, leans close to Louise, close enough for her to register his fetid breath. D'Entrecasteaux has

a barrel of cider vinegar on board for those with decaying teeth and bleeding gums, I can hear her think, but she doubts its abilities to sweeten this sailor's breath.

"There's a problem with the forward hold."

She queries him with a brow rather than a word, the less she speaks the better; a thrusting jaw line does little to disguise a feminine voice.

It's been obvious for some time that stowage is a problem. Louise had heard Kermadec and D'Auribeau discussing the ship's trim, now at a draught of thirteen feet and nine inches. With eighteen months of stores it was always going to be difficult. The hold had been packed and repacked, the list of goods referred to many times, with things struck off and unloaded only to be reloaded next day at someone's insistence. Labillardière had arrived to find his twenty two reams of paper sitting on the dock, a fine drizzle curling their edges, and the potato seller's boys folding shapeless paper boats and dropping them over the side where they listed to starboard or larboard drunkenly. This had amusing the sailors who were quick to draw comparisons with the ships they were to crew. The paper, after much dispute, was eventually lugged back on board to dry out in the great cabin which was already cluttered with scientific equipment.

Riche was still lamenting the loss of his gadgetry. He had lined the great cabin with various instruments and materials, half of which had been included in the first eviction, and which no amount of remonstrations would allow back on board. Bertrand, a sickly looking man with dark deep-set eyes and a look about him that Louise had been quick to – correctly – term him a *disturbance to the ether*, was the most fervent of protesters.

In the hold, barrels of sea biscuit and salted pork were stored in sizes from barrique to pièces de 4. It was as the sailor said, everything had been stored or stacked as agreed upon, but there was insufficient room for it all. The *Recherché* was a gabre, a store ship, with its gun deck remodelled to allow officer's cabins to line each bulkhead, leaving only six guns remaining at its waist. These were intended more to deal with any recalcitrant natives they might encounter than a serious attempt to defend themselves at sea. Pens held goats and sheep and crates of hens had been secured between each gun, making it more barnyard than bellum.

There were ten more barriques containing lemon syrup, molasses, conserve of sorrel, sauerkraut, spruce beer and vinegar than room could be found for. The commanders had seen fit to replicate the list of antiscorbutics Cook had voyaged with.

"You think they'll work?" the half-eared sailor, Julien, asks.

"Dead weight," she grumbles. Abalen, the ship's boy, appears around the corner rolling an eleventh barrel.

"Sour-krete?" the sailor struggles to read the foreign word.

"Pickled cabbage," she interprets.

Félix Delahaye, the expedition's gardener, to whom fell the role of sowing plants onto foreign soils, was to quarter with the crew. Perhaps it was an oversight that he, an educated man from the Jardin de Roi, was to do so. His fall of face when Louise directed him there said much; he stood with his modest carpet bag surrounded by seven additional cases of seeds, plants and gardening equipment for some time, not just taking in his surroundings, she understood, but acquainting himself with his new position in life. He was quietly rueful, and not for the first time I felt for him. Louise dutifully found him, as I once had, a place where his supplies could be stored both dry and safe from rodents while being accessible enough not to require shifting each time they sought land. Delahaye explained to Louise that he'd been given an allowance of 1236 livres, more than his yearly wage, to secure them, and he was meticulous in their care. He spoke nothing of his disappointment.

Delahaye stared at Louise's hands when she pushed a trunk behind a hatch ladder. Even gloved they were petite beside his. His roughened and dark from years of working at the Jardin du Roi. Louise, noticing the attention, resisted the urge to hide them behind her back or stuff them deep into pockets. Hiding them would only increase suspicion; the gloves were a practical choice, she had hoped they would merely be perceived as an idiosyncrasy.

"Do you think we might find him?" he asks.

Louise assumes Delahaye refers to La Perouse, the man they are obliged to find. She shakes her head,

"There are many places one might hide a ship in the ocean."

Delahaye nods,

"I hope we discover what happened, for his wife."

Everyone had heard of how La Perouse's wife, Eléonore, who he had married for love only two years before his voyage, still sustained hope he might yet survive.

"I almost took up employment at Allard's." Louise confides in Delahaye.

"Not heard of it."

"The sea biscuit bakery." She smiles wryly, but smiling's inadvisable, it makes of her a woman. Working at the bakery was something I'd once have considered impossible, finding myself ill-designed for tedium. The two employments, baker and ship's purser, far exceeded themselves in their remoteness, one in my ability to tolerate the drudgery and the other geographically.

"Perhaps it would be best to stay here." Louise says, thinking however turbulent it was in France it would be preferable to cleaving to an assemblage of roughly caulked planks in places she could not recall herself from.

Sentiments I'd encourage if only I could. I move closer to Delahaye, and study the pores on his cheeks, the novelty of my position still encouraging me to adopt new and inquisitive angles, hoping that my weightless fingers might make some impression on the susceptible. I press my fingers to his hand – nothing.

“Many never return from voyages like these” Delahaye agrees, sensing the reason for Louise’s disquiet, “But I could not bear to think I hadn’t tried. We all imagine we’ll be one of the lucky ones; it’s the nature of man. Though I shudder at the thought of death on a lonely isle, or worse,” he adds grimly.

Delahaye, despite his disappointment at his demotion, foresaw the opportunity to achieve greatness, as perhaps they all did. He drew out a book Andre Thouin, chief gardener at Le Jardin du Roi, had given him to study during the times when soil was submerged many fathoms beneath; Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae*. There’s a reverence to his movements that touches her.

Louise had learnt all she could of La Perouse and his expedition before boarding. His ship had set out six years earlier, in 1785 - less tumultuous times. What she’d gleaned had been from Madame Le Fournier and tatty copies of Le Figaro with its smeary ink and political rhetoric. He’d left with two ships, La Astrolabe and La Boussole, laden with blue glass beads and ship’s biscuit, in search of fertile shores, ones amenable to colonisation. There’d been several reports received plotting his course - Easter Island, Maui, Alaska, Monterey, California, Macau and the Philippines. From there the ill-fated voyage travelled on to the East China Sea, into Siberian waters and eventually to Petropavlovsk where La Perouse received orders to make haste for Botany Bay. He arrived eight days after Captain Phillip. By that time, the expedition had suffered the loss of six officers and fifteen men in Alaska, drowned. Then further tragedy: the commander of La Astrolabe and eleven men killed in a native attack in Tutuila. The survivors recuperated in Sydney and after a stay of six weeks the two ships left Botany Bay. Then - nothing. Their journey is a series of connected black dots that fade away.

Perhaps there’s a great shelled turtle who knows the whereabouts of La Perouse as it glides past his barnacled bones, or perhaps a shark yet more intimate with his death. There will be no further word, Louise feels, reaching French ears. It was not for the sake of his distraught young bride Eléonore, who even now awaits word of her childhood sweetheart that Louise had secured a letter of recommendation from Madame d’Yauville, nor was it the fate of the Astrolabe that lured her to the port of Brest.

The galley, usually a hotbed of activity, was unsettlingly quiet. Jean, the cook had gone in search of spices but hadn’t returned. Abalen had found him heaving in a corner at one of the dockside taverns, not an uncommon occurrence for any of the sailors. Most of them had immersed themselves in as many forms of debauchery as their pockets and time allowed. The cook was recovering in the bread room, keeping well away from the officers’ notice.

Louise had taken the situation in hand and sat Jean on a stool in the galley, giving him a cup of the vile tasting Schoum, with its peppered mint oil and extract of fumitory, and suggesting he sleep it off in some quiet corner. If she had thought it would engender



kindness in him, she would be wrong. He is one man who would do everything to reveal Louise in the years to come.

Abalen, the galley boy, throws coal at the open maw of the iron stove, taking delight in the showers of sparks. A clip to the side of his ear sends him scuttling. There's a meal required for eighty men within the next hour and nothing has been done towards it. While it would be easiest to prise open a barrel of the dried soup tablets, the ones shipped in from Ireland, and serve soup along with the ubiquitous sea biscuit, they would all soon tire of this fare. Abalen, who at eighteen thought himself too old for his ears to receive such attention and whose pride was still smarting, even if his ear was not, was sent to purchase the remaining potatoes from the woman on the dock. Jacques, the galley boy was given several livres to purchase unwilted bunches of chervil. There was a side of beef and bread fresh baked that morning along with slices from the Langres, whose round annatto tinted sides had been washed in Marc de Champagne, and would be sufficient not to afford cause for complaint from the captain. She familiarised herself with the oddities of the iron stove, an improvement no doubt on the fired brick ancestors of these hulking black beasts, but which puffed smoke at errant draughts and drew like an old man on a pipe. Her brisk movements and familiar patterns of chopping, dicing and peeling were quiet salvation.

I spent the last night at dock perched on the edge of Louise's hammock, my weight insufficient to unbalance the canvas. I'd stared into the gently shifting space and contemplated the practicalities of my new ethereality. Perching, walking, lying are requisite no longer, only habitual. To climb a ladder has for forty years required a specific movement of limbs, a flex and pull of muscles, a distribution of weight on the pads of the feet. Now willing it to be is sufficient. Yet still I arrange an imagination of limbs and go through the process of defying gravity.

Louise lies in the darkness, I can feel her back ache, her throat's dry, her dreams scud across like dispersing clouds. I trace her features with a life thin finger, flick a nail at an insect navigating the precipice of her cheek. I find this intimacy with my once-self strangely grotesque. Her face, in sleep, has a childishness I despise. I know what she's running from, I know what she has, and what she will lose. In the end I am the only vestige of herself she will keep. She's a fool, her confidence in her own bravado misplaced. Her quest is nothing more than an accumulation of selfish desires.

I lean over, my shadow mouth over her parted lips and inhale. Perhaps I can inflate my thin self with the fat of her soul. But it will not dislodge. Perhaps I can breathe myself back into her living corpse. But this too is in vain. I cannot fathom why I must shadow her, why I must trace these missteps. I cannot change anything; Louise is gambling her thirty-seven years. All my past selves appear at the grey window of her soul and glare at her. How dare she, after all they've been through. The eleven year old motherless child, the wife of Etienne, the purveyor of song, the mother - all of them will be lost. But it is done now; the ship will soon

leave shore. No further change of heart is possible. If I have been sent to effect that change, then I have failed.

A month ago Louise had acquired men's clothing from a tailor; he'd taken without question her leg measurements and request for several pairs of breeches. No doubt in these strange times it was best not to question, especially if paid in crumpled five livre notes. Louise took to sitting on crowded streets and watching men. Counterfeiting them first in her mind, then spending hours before the warped mirrors of cheap rooms mimicking them till she felt an answering shift from muscle. She'd walked the streets to test her disguise. At first afraid to use her voice, she smoked cigarito after cigarito, not to join the burgeoning bourgeoisie but to add the timbre of smoke to her words. She tutored her face into a grim humourlessness lest she betray herself with womanish laughter. She failed to pluck her brows, but trimmed her lashes. She slept with a bandage pulled tight from head to chin forcing it into a ruthless thrust that made her jaw ache. The transformation was flawed by her hands, which are small, their gestures unmistakably used to drinking green tea and rapidly turning the pages of *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* rather than poring over Robespierre's latest speech while sipping a darker, more bitter brew. She took to treating her hands like people with whom she held stern yet silent conversations. As she stepped inside coffee houses she tutored them on how to raise a cup to lips. She wore gloves at all times, a fashion, unfortunately for her, which was falling out of favour. They made smoking difficult. There were the ardent few who, not having succumbed to the lure of tobacco, spent their time handing out pamphlets on street corners warning that the new craze for smoking was doomed to start fires. No doubt they'd observed Louise as time and again she filled rooms with the smell of scorched leather.

Louise is short of stature and despite a slightly higher heel, there's little she can do to change it. She's thin now; those who once knew her would not know her now. Anguish blunts her hunger and has her lying abed in sheets wet and salted with a well-seasoned anger. Her hips are thin, thighs sinewy, her bust reduced to the tight buds of a girl before her menses. These she binds in cotton swaddling and are of no great consequence.

The transformation from Louise to Louis took less than two months, and seventeen livres. It was her only method of escape. Choosing to become a man was a strange decision. But it was the only alternative to a configuration of rope from which to hang, an accidental slipping before a coach on the Boulevard de la Reine, an open window from which to fall. Louise hadn't been ready for such choices then. But sometime in the months and years to come she will stand on the thin wooden lip of La Recherche's deck, in the middle of the North Atlantic or Pacific Ocean with their strange gravity, and feel she might.

The crew of the Recherche and her sister ship the Esperance have as many reasons for sailing far from France as she does, not least the search for La Perouse. France is in the grip

of an illness that has inflamed senses, fevered minds and whose treatment is almost certainly the letting of blood. It had seemed wise to join a voyage which would take her far from both her father and France's reach. And it would be with D'Entrecasteaux; a respected commander who would protect the crew from the mutiny and dissension so rife at port. Despite Louise's continued admiration for The General, her confidence in his abilities had been misplaced. They'd no sooner left shore than the muddy pools of politics bubbled.

There were personalities on board I wish I could, like Riche preparing a specimen, take a knife to. Excise the human personality as cleanly as he does a fish's heart and intestines. Cracks in civility will open up within days like dirty wounds and fester. The Raoul brothers, they would be first for the incision, their malice and petty cruelties removed with a sure flick. But I will wield no knife again, my fingers are insufficient to the task; instead I'm cursed to watch Louise make the same mistakes. What cruelty is this? First to have lived that life, captive inside my body; now again, from a ghostly remove, unable to even speak out against my persecutors. I might yet find a way.

*Today we left shore. Crowds gathered on the dock to wave us on, D'Entrecasteaux acknowledging them with graciousness. I knew he was embarrassed by the heavy draft of the ships as we lumbered out to sea, yet it was replaced by humble pride when he broke the seal on his orders and found that both Kermadec and D'Auribeau have been elevated to full captains, and himself to Rear Admiral. We spilled our wind and allowed the Esperance to come alongside. D'Auribeau used the speaking trumpet to bellow out the news across the chop. Labillardière had already gone below, his cheeks caved in and green, too embarrassed by the heaviness of his belly and the need to spill his own wind.*

*D'Auribeau advised Labillardière to eat despite his illness, but he refused, choosing drafts of sweetened brandy to fortify himself, and as such is spending much time leaning over the rail or groaning in his cabin.*

*Abalen discovered stowaways not long after we set sail, a sailor and his son, and a third man who claimed to be a sailor, but the crew took one look at his hands and denounced him. D'Entrecasteaux was obliged to sail for Bertheaume and row them to shore. Their faces, such regret. I count myself lucky.*

*11<sup>th</sup> October*

*There was an eclipse of the moon at 10.55am. I saw nothing of it, as I was below at the time. The crew said there was nothing to see. It is unfathomable to me that the astronomers know that earth had come to stand between the sun and the moon, with our shadow cast across an invisible moon. In daylight it was a phenomenon of little significance except to the astronomers who were much invigorated by it. Bertrand's eyes have been attacked by the salt air and water so greatly he has trouble seeing more than foot in front of himself. It is doubtful he can see the thousands of miles required. As an astronomer his*

*condition thwarts his purpose and he spends much time with Renard who has failed to find a remedy for the secretions.*

*D'Entrecasteaux requested that La Grande discuss with us the libration of the moon. He had studied the work of Joseph Louis Lagrange and was able to explain, most ably, why the moon always shows the same face to earth. A question was asked about the eclipse of the sun and he was agreeable in explaining this too. I find his answers raise only more questions, but with the quality of those on board I have only to raise them.*

*My mother once told me that if you looked at the moon closely you could see God's handprint from where he had pushed it away from earth and left it just the right distance away to light up a dark night sky. I do not think they would be amused by her astronomical insight.*

*12 October*

*The third watch sight Pico de Teide. Roused by the call I went on deck to see it gleam in the moonlight. Merite believed it looked like a breast with the slight nipple at its volcanic peak. The seas have been rough this past week and the scientific passengers look forward to sucking on land's tit. Tomorrow we'll harbour at St Croiz. Tenerife is but the first stage of our journey. I am not convinced the constitutions of some will enable them to continue much further. I continue to sleep only fitfully.*

### **Pozolana, pumice and volcanic glass**

In a calm harbor the firing of a cannon sends a shimmer around a ship's waterline. Louise leans over the larboard side to study the ripples as the second cannon fire punches the air. I stand some distance from her and observe what occurs while her back is turned. It's Jacques-Henry. He has the ear of Willaumez. He's miming shaving his jaw over the sound of the third cannon, pointing at Louise on the fourth. Louise turns then, and catches them watching. Willaumez has the glowering countenance of a wolf. Louise looks away again. She's recalling her last movements, identifying anything that might have alerted their attention. She thrusts out her belligerent chin like a challenge. But I already know it won't be enough, fourth, fifth. D'Entrecasteaux is rocking on his heels. He can see a procession of horse and carriages coming down the hill towards the dock. He is to be greeted royally by Fontpertuis, the French consul. Sixth, seventh, the acrid smoke blows back and across the gunnels.

Eighth, ninth, tenth. Her ears ring between each burst of sound. Louise can sense the intensity of Willaumez across the deck. She dare not meet his eye. I sense the moment when her nerve fails, much the same time as Willaumez inhales deeply, and sighs like a satisfied lover. Jacques-Henry is spitting out his words, his hands thrash the air as they try to

keep up with his steady torrent. Willaumez lifts a slow finger and Jacques-Henry quiets, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth. I'd walk away now if I could. I would clamber down the larboard side and drift across the water like a fallen leaf. Fourteen, fifteen. A drift of silence; smoke disperses across the water, a vague blue haze. Fingers are withdrawn from ears, and eyes lift to the hills where sounds the first of an answering fifteen gun salute. I needn't count. I have done so before. And there is Louise, scant feet from me, counting them for what she believes the first time.

Willaumez motions to the Raoul brothers, Joseph-Francois the older, and second pilot and Ange, the helmsmen. They're lithe and beautiful with dusky skin and dark eyes. Their unconscious grace as they move about the deck is mesmerizing: their fluidity, the breadth of their shoulders, the symmetry of their divinely curved jaws. It could pass no one's notice that these men with their dark curls require only the addition of wings to gain entry into the world of angels. Their mother, no doubt convinced of this, called her second son Ange, knowing he would follow the mold of his older brother and have us draw the comparison for ourselves. But they are no angels. Whatever it is they hold inside, it has curdled. They are goaders, jibbers, tormenters. Their talent for finding weaknesses has already become apparent. What you once held sacred, or proud becomes a source of shame and humiliation. So far Louise had remained undetected. But her talent for invisibility is about to end.

D'Entrecasteaux had already been assisted over the side and into a waiting liberty boat. Louise's avoidance of Willaumez's was obvious in the intensity with which she watches a spilled bucket of water slip across the deck, and with which she tilts her head to view the sails. She slips into the galley thinking herself safe. She is not. I follow in her wake. Behind me come the four men; they brush past my station at the door. It takes a moment for their eyes to adjust to the dimness. This isn't a problem I share. It has taken me some time to accustom myself to having eyes like those of a lizard, able to see in all directions at once. This can be disorientating. Sometimes I wish to close my eyes and rest them from this damning vision. But lidless and sleepless, vision has become an abrasive thing.

Jean, the cook is laboring mightily over his buckwheat dough, his beefy arms slap against his sides with each rocking forward. Louise, oblivious to their entry, stands from where she's been feeding the stove and turns to view the tableau of treachery. She starts, recovers quickly, but it is the moment of fear before she recovers that incites them.

'Jacques-Henry, he has made an observation,' Willaumez smirks.

Louise looks to Jacques-Henry with an inquiring but skeptical eye. Willaumez, however, is not ready to share the stage and intercepts before the boy can speak.

'We're wondering, how is it that your razor gives such a close shave?' he rubs his jaw and pretends admiration for her smooth skin.

Louise stares blankly for several seconds. Then lifts her stubbleless chin, again that feeble defense.

'You've heard of Débarras, the bearded woman saint?' she asks.

'So, you're saying you're a saint?' Ange taunts.

'There are bearded women Ange, and now you've met your first unbearded man.'

'I find that just a little difficult to believe, Girardin.' Willaumez cocks his head to one side and observes her closely, his eyes settling on her chest.

'My father was unbearded, and his father before him. I'm sure there's nothing you can add to this conversation that hasn't been said before.'

'So you've had to drop your breeches before today to prove you're a man?'

Louise smiles wryly, 'Once upon a time I would have obliged. But I feel no need these days to prove myself.'

I know what is to come. I have no desire to see it. I seek out the doorway and perform a quiet service to myself. I burrow into time and search out information difficult to recall. Mathematics is useful, but today I cannot pin down an equation. I've listed items in the hold, the names of sails, and of the crew members who climb them, many times over, it's absorbing, but banal work.

September: the month I had once known was no longer. It had been liberated from its duty as calibrator of days, and was now, as Faas, a particularly hairy Dutchman in Batavia, had told me, supplanted by a new month, that of Vendémiaire - the Grape Harvest. Faas needed to be conversant with the new calendar that France had instigated but his mouth twisted when he handed me the book and derided the names. October was now formally referred to as Brumaire – fog; November - Frimaire – frost. I could imagine children looking out their window and finding cause for celebration in the correlation between name and that great abstract procession of moon and sun, moon and sun, a tide of days that bore no significance to their names. Mostly the months had been named for Roman gods. September, however had been named for its position as the seventh month, when in fact it was the ninth. Now it began the calendar year, but silently - its name rubbed out and a new one replacing it.

January, had been named for the God of Doors and it had led us through the entrance to a new year for centuries but is now demoted to the fifth month and a new and dismal name imposed - Pluviôse – rainy.

Willaumez's fingers clutch Louise's jaw, twisting her head savagely from side to side as though inspecting her beardlessness. Louise resists the inspection, but is no match. There appears between them a knife with a short wooden handle sufficient for her to grasp with a clenched fist, and a blade, a rime of rust along its length, which rests now against the fabric of his shirt, the only defense between the knife and his chest.

'I will drop my breeches if you allow me to go in search of your heart, for I fear you have none.' Her teeth clink together on the word none, and her eyes say she will do it. But both of them know it would be a death sentence should she do so. Willaumez, Louise and I, we all know it's an empty threat.

The calendar, back to the calendar. Calendar, calendar. The image on its cover has the outmoded Gregorian version cast aside. A seated Marianne in her Phrygian cap leans on a carved arm rest of a six breasted woman, I do not understand the symbolism of such an over-endowed creature. Marianne studies a book on naturalism, and dictates to an attentive cherub beside her. Would I recognise December? Nivôse – snowy. February - now Ventôse – windy. The world of France has changed, in those few short years in which I turned from it; it became a different creature, a place where I would be lost within its days. Each day has a signifier; my own birthdate, once the 29<sup>th</sup> of June, is now the 11<sup>th</sup> day of Messidor, signified by the piquancy of Coriander. On searching through the tattered book I'd not even recognised the days of the week, no longer were there seven on a perpetual wheel, but ten, called *décades*. My birthdate always to fall on Primidi, the first day of the ten day week.

Not content to dissect the year, and the week, and reassemble a manikin of such strange dimensions, the Republicans took to time with a hammer, and flattened out the hours, each of them now expanding to one hundred decimal minutes, comprising of one hundred decimal seconds, and together these two section a day into ten hours.

Somewhere those I once knew are walking a different time, a different beat. In spring they will witness the great unfurling of leaves and call it Germinal; in April, when buds have burst – Floréal, and in May when grasses grow – Prairial.

Louise curls, choking and clutching her belly on the hot bricked floor before the stove. Ange has kicked her knife across the floor, where it lodges between vats of soaking dishes. The men are gone. Jean, the chef she'd dosed with schoum, leans over her. Louise thinks it is to tend to her. Instead he reaches over her and levers open the stove door with a hooked tool. He prods the glowing blocks of timber till a shower of sparks settle on Louise as she struggles to control the breath compressed in her lungs. He slams the door, wipes the tool once each side across her leg. His thickened fingers crusted in bread dough push against his grimy knees. He grunts as he stands, his knees popping. He returns to the bench where he resumes kneading.

And what great abundance of time pieces will there be, clocks laid aside and forlorn, their hands idle in their shallow white laps. For they keep pace with a different world. How many timekeepers would stay awake all ten newly minted hours of the day calibrating cogs to move to a different discipline?

And you, Étienne, born in Thermidor, the summer heat, with flax as your signifier, and our son Jean, so many years later in Fructidor, the fruit of my womb, on the day of the trout, my slippery fish that got away.

At night Louise lights her companion candle and hunches over her journal while I amuse myself with recollections of childhood, of marriage, and of meals once had. Her fingers, unclothed hunch too around the quill and she scrawls so earnest across the pages.

*I entertain myself with the belief that all things have genders and that I can divine them. A length of rope is male. Its twisting sinews bind, tie down. Sails, those great billowing skirts are women who crave men's constant attention. A simple wooden bucket is a vacant vessel to be filled – woman. A cup, a fork, a timber rail; an obsession I cannot stop. And you, journal, are like a bent and shabby nun clutching at secrets. As I write I see my hand and know at a glance, despite its disrepair, that it is cast straight from the stamp that is woman. A glimpse in a curved bowl of my cheek or jaw: gender revealed! And all around me male, and male and male once more.*

*Willaumez provokes me about my beardless jaw, the use of my chamber pot, my secrecy. How much longer my feeble deception, when will the moment come to pass, Etienne, when I am undone?*