

Ropewalk

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ABSTRACT

Ropewalk

Angela Carr

This work takes, as its overall trajectory, a leap from the heights of “factual” and “authentic” historical writing to the sea of fiction and myth. The first of the long poems, *Ropewalk*, is a sham biography of the French renaissance poet Louise Labé. To emphasize that much existing biography of Labé arises from interpretation of her lyrical poetry, the work incorporates lines of her sonnets, badly translated so that certain of the French words remain. Just as such translation does not seek to produce an apparition of the original, the poem does not seek to represent Louise Labé’s life, but rather that of an unidentified lyrical ‘I’ belonging to both past and present. The second long poem, *Ninth Month*, is autobiographical, written from the interior of the final month of pregnancy. It acts as an introduction to the third long poem, *Mountance of a Dream*, also autobiographical. The spaces here are feminine and interior as well, but the writing self is undone, due to the birth of her daughter; her past is reassessed and in this reassessment changes. Past events are recalled via the dream; and these events, as in *Ropewalk*, have to be reinvented in light of the present. The final poems are mythical. Writing around the story of Hero and Leander, they attempt to find its lost element, the feminine voice, and reverse, as do Labé’s sonnets, the expected genders of lover and beloved. The past in question here is a written, fictional past.

For Tomas Diaz Valenzuela

Acknowledgements

Versions of some of the poems rendered in this book have previously appeared in *Slingshot*.

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The stairs I take

The stairs I take are not stone.
At their top is no door. No representation
of a room.

In this moonless place the smell of salt
as though you were taller than me.

Grief is more plentiful than blood, it
cannot be spilt. I can say this

without spilling anything.
What I hand to you is undamaged.

A solid limestone bench bearing a plaque
with the dates of one who died,

At the age you are now. Blue mountains
in the distance slide
in the brown water
at our feet: an imperceptible tide

I would dream of showing you. But first
a ball brushes against you, a baby needs feeding,
the sun pelts down on our skin.

Itinerary

Some words that dropped too far into sleep

Some words I awoke

Light: jagged lines, over waves or mountains.

The poem's line is seaweed

A strand of wool on the beach

Later, balls of wool: pebbles (black and white)

Flash of light the dream turned stone.
If of smoke on a still blue sky

A body not visible but for a faint

Line

And three stairs leading up to a door with three windows

Barefoot

Because at first we did not want to disturb anyone, and later, anything

Because wind in the hair a word

Watch this bird to see whether it is an augury. Sparrows are everywhere, even
the dusklight is a sparrow.

About three windows
Time is provided but what sort of time

If a rotting door. Rather, angel

Impatient, unknown and never heard

Doubt, an assailant,

Waits

Here is a notebook, here is a bed
Some nights I am asked How are you. I do not sleep
near the cold floor religiously.

Idle sounds at the end of the corridor
Perhaps we have slipped in through the neglected door and
are hiding

Because leaving is under glass, love

Ropewalk: The Louise Labé Poems

Ropewalk: A long, covered walk, or a low level building, where ropes are manufactured.

In long and narrow alleyways, yarns are stretched out between revolving hooks 300 yards apart. These yarns are wound into ropes, suitably long for use on tall ships. This method of rope-making, the “ropewalk,” was in use during the renaissance; ropes were made from flax or hemp; the part of the plant used was the bast; the strength of the rope was measured in grams/denier (an old silk measure).

Of bow strings none remain.

Whenever I braid my hair, the mistaking of one smaller strand makes for an unbalanced plait, one that is impossible to complete, for the thinner strand slips from my finger, unwinding. It is easier to achieve two strands of equal strength; balance is given more easily to two than three; strolling groups diverge into couples; the Easter sun races through dusk, night and day forming the largest portion. So the braid undoes itself.

This

This is the case with Louise Labé, myself, and the much conjectured third party who was the object of her sonnets, her lover. One of us is too thin; most often it is myself or the beloved (whom I have called H). One of us is too thin, the braid unwinds, the hair is wild, words flying left and right with no rational temper. I know too little about myself, and even less about the beloved, the ghost of a ghost.

The beloved I call

The beloved I call H after Henri, the French dauphin and then king in Louise's lifetime. According to myth, Louise single-handedly defeated an entire army at Perpignan when accompanying this future king to war. A second story places her, in the same year, participating in a fencing tournament for the dauphin during a carnival to celebrate his appearance in Lyons. Whether she fought, really, or figuratively, in the year 1542, with a sword in one hand, is a question. In this capacity, the swordswoman, she is known as le capitaine Loys. That she loved Henri is a rumour; that she loved someone other than her husband seems undeniable.

capitaine loys facts infrequent
lettered and under testimony
roamed carnivals in drag
a secret merchant class fact: who
was class? fact? women
wearing letters on their chest
formed acrostics for the dauphin
but we are concerned with god's
not tentative testimony are we

The beloved I call H after history, for it is an historical act to give him a name.

Many say that Olivier de Magny fell in love with Louise in 1554; her *Oeuvres* was published in 1555. Olivier was a fellow poet and a regular of her salon, the literary centre of Lyons, where he attended her with rapture, enamoured. A poem he published in 1559, *Ode a Sire Aymon*, ridicules a rope-maker: undoubtedly Ennemond, Louise's husband. There are two sorts of ties: the first is made with rope, and the second with the silvery lute string. To elaborate, the rope is coarse, clumsy, common, heavy; the lute string is delicate, refined, lustrous, quivering.

when my eyes, as my lute
have rent that tender cord
tears: a broken string

A sonnet is published by Louise Labé, and another by Olivier de Magny; they are, excepting spelling variations, exactly the same up to the final sestet. An elaborate dance in which the partners mirror one another's steps and then, as suddenly as a bird might strike the window, they turn, and move apart. If Louise loves poetry more than she loves him, if he loves poetry more than he loves Louise, who conquers?

Later, in immense new lands which surprisingly stood athwart
Olivier de magny: his prolonged absence provokes
Under and navigating by stars
an Increasing number of poems
a Soft chair in the salon stands empty
Elsewhere, new land a utensil, he eats

These last hours of her maidenhood
she becomes available. What's valence
and what's opposite : in the centre a trunk,
on the outskirts, leaves

I'd like to see her draw her sword
and slice
through the page in which she's pictured.
Then
I could catch her bouquet.

Lettered and under testimony

Of trees

U

In which she's pictured

She becomes available

H E N R I

e u n

r m

o t

v u h

e r e

i e s

l d e

i l

s e

a

v

e

s

Come death, of my envies ease

Is each eye a ring then? What
is the girth of the sun? Cares
my thirst for shops? And of the trunk
these sticky arms encircle: if the
beloved said to me, Dear friend,
vie for the tree, would I be for the tree?
What if these arms were torn from me?

Literature and the sciences are accustomed to bear this
acOllé arms holding it
Under customs of cut and paste
In as much as faces iceux my touching heart
a Spark was stolen from you
Even so, erroneous

Orbital dwelling, a valence
lover far from the heart:
a swimmer with a toe in.

I am a tenant. My life
arrows toward :

Lovers ghost.

venoit death, my envious ease
the lovers' are blind eyes, i have them already

In *Notes sur la fortune posthume de Louise Labé*, Enzo Guidici collects twenty-seven short pieces of fiction inspired by (the lack of true biography for) Labé. Our mysterious woman was a favourite of the romantics, one of whom altered the sole existing portrait of Labé for a softer and prettier lady.

Leaving no evidence
Of her stay
Unsimilar tongue
Into soft running to avoid it-
Self
Turn Eye, turn

Where are Love's dangerous arrows

O so many goods

Vaguely sweet as though

I could not say who came by boat and who

S

Estimate or mirror

Twine: a string used for stitching coarse fabrics, for lying, for sewing sails.

Left with little evidence
Of you this is known
Upwardly mobile artisan class
Including both text and criticism
Sonnets and
Ease guesses also

Sun towards me turn

Eyes, turn contraries

Cordelier (OED): 1) A Franciscan Friar of the strict rule so called from the knotted cord they wear around the waist. 2) Name of one of the political clubs of the French revolution (club des cordeliers) so called because it met in an old convent of the cordeliers. 3) Name given to a machine for rope-making.

To think water, that is all and all

Overwhelming any map

Unreported, unremembered

wrist controlled, under

Shades of service

Evaporates

The warwolf is hard to listen to

I climb up the stairs, to the sidewalk. A woman, sheep's wool covering her forearms and hands, asks, "Can you open my door for me?" Holding out her arm, a blue key in her palm's deep wool. Her arm shakes as though aboard a rickety train. A dream, in which the dreamer is pursued by an animal, is unrealized music. Here on the surface, the peaches hanging from trees are torn placentas, and fetal water seeps through a crack in the pavement. These leaves are bloody, the human figure about to stand fading and failing, a haze. Here on the surface, the sheep make a lot of noise, but if they didn't, I would be afraid.

Ninth Month

The Romish Rituals direct the act of baptizing the child, in cases of danger, before it is born, - but upon this proviso, That some part or other of the child's body be seen by the baptizer.

I.

Niches and eyes in niches.

You have these.

Nighteggs in

seely nest; in

egg.

What space is negated by baby?

What names in abeyance?

The words are hand

painted, matrioshka dolls

one inside the

other. Your

tiny circumstance

head - kind - hands

baptized by any water

other than mine.

II.

Unseen one
kicking the unmuscled
unlittle
belly.

How do I feel? Well,
A rock with a god in.
A rock with a god hot and churning in.

Like a mountain, I can move
not in not
out of the poem

until you see
until you're seen
until you're born.

III.

Hoof Depressions in Leaf Flat

So many ponies
kicking. My

forearm's under, a pillow
presses my yellow hair -
Can you see the leaf veins
there? The hair

is on the outside.

IV.

This kicking one changes [his] world

Elects representatives

And middle muscles

Unmakes

Dangerous lakes

Unwonders colours

How easily a map is crumpled:

Leaving no evidence

Of [her] stay

No scent soaked into the hardbearing

Muscle or marrow

Stretch mark here:

The heavily creased spine of a book

After a diver has jumped all in

One

V.

Here we are, seated on the warehouse roof on Neufmont again. Heavy, sweet snows ambulate forms from the sleeping skies; the phenomenon of remembering does not exceed your expectations. Months are solid, dense things, but the living warm their hands over a fire. When, below the ninth month, my cervix ripens, I will seek out your face from a crowd, and in the process I will drop this paper. Because a body can lie on the pavement, opening odours, uttering syllables, using ugly ugly ugly hungry snivels.

Under a Toddler

Pee on the library
rug, between the education stacks

on the trombone
on the table (Saturday)
on the trouble

Pissing into dream's rooms

Hurrying down bell's closed afternoons
between weddings

Practical experience: this is how
I chased her through the microfilm

(where half-naked mirrors)

Losing with whom I might be

Bent over a low, wooden table
A woman asks,
Might she sew me a black gown for the meal.

One by one, three men
Onto the roof from a ladder,
Large, covered soup tureens
On even larger china boxes, balanced
On the head of each.

And they approach our table.

Sadness is carried this way
Breaking the small bones in the neck
Or else it is blown about
A caged-bird in the wind

The woman I wrote of then
Is not the same woman
I write of, of the past:

Her workshop is a basement;
She is pale, her hair uncut,
Her clothes hang from her.

I write the same dream.

Mountance of a Dream

The mountance of a dream is the length of time required to travel a dream.

i.

I elect the house, and the threats to the house.

A mouse travels the kitchen walls, clinging like an insect, but of course larger, and furry. The wood beams are unfinished; they are also furry. This is a poor person's house, the mice scurry over their mother's body. I awaken the cat. Having trapped a mouse effortlessly, she prepares to eat. Relieved at the cessation of squeaks, I reflect on how uncannily those utterances were like sounds my daughter and I made when we pretended to be mice, neither of us ever actually having heard one.

In the second dream I am in the house and someone is trying to get in. They are in the front and then the back instantaneously. A cat is slipped through the mail slot, a thin cat we catch effortlessly.

Three branches hover in the breeze at the window.

The next night

It is so dark I cannot see the branches; the window instead offers reflections. I am in the country, driving down a two-wheel tractor road in a small truck. The woman with me has brought three objects; one for each of the two brothers who are in love with her; the third is a child's stuffed mouse. When at the house their father speaks, it becomes apparent that the first two objects are those that the brothers have chosen; for this reason I cannot recall what they are, not having been chosen by her.

ii.

The animal spirits responsible for memory are neither animal nor spirit. Memory is a mainspring for discomfort: wriggling figures are dissected on the first tables of the Royal Society. Eels, worms, wet fish: the way memory feels, a wet slippery thing at the foot of the bed.

(No longer the woman who writes, she is the house in which the family is turned to stone. A half-hearted conversation on the landing is infinite. Stairs, coated in a translucent

animal spirit

iii.

Maybe any name is a house.

I climb up the stairs and on the landing stop
To look at a collage: photographs, gold paper, at waist
Height as if hung by a child. In each
Sky bisecting the landscape. A butterfly.
There is my face in the mirror the child holds
Up to her face, what a strange effect, stray

Maybe this, my face

I climb the stairs and then a second set of stairs
Lines, inverted stairs: scores in the deep bark
Elm and crescent owl, ginger-coloured eyes like mine
Clawing at a branch each metal string
Reverberates, like the remembered image.
That is my home, in the hands of a man
Who resembles something of the past.

iv.

some nights there are no dreams

it is cold i sit hovering
ghostlike not quite alive

drink water try
to clear the rubble from my throat

v.

Learn fear.

Discovered in the dark as alive.

I am bearing it up the metro stairs.

I polish its shiny skin

while hiding it under my coat.

Fear, as though wet.

These grown-up fingers

can't hide anything anyway.

vi.

If the tongue were a leaf I would be silent all winter.

If time was singular and without grief, time was.

(should be married instead and i remember the twilight of this arrangement spring
on the deck and the light the colour of pine needles)

There is my hand in water

There is water but fear is colder
Harder in the throat like words

God's many atrocities fossilized

Labé was to Calvin "a common whore"

vii.

When the phone rings don't answer it
Or do this time it's
Someone I haven't spoken to in so long
Intentionally avoided
Kept myself my daughter from

Sadness could be caused by

Sadness

viii.

I climb the stairs and enter a child's playground.
A man swings on the bars, nostrils full of sand,
And shouts to the surrounding abyss.

A wall
I could feel with my hand dissolves when I try
To lean on it. Inside myself
I feel nothing.

ix.

I climb the stairs at the open door
Remove my shoes
Wet socks then too.
Each step is a leaf. The leaves
Are thick glass cut
To look like glass.

If at the top of the stairs I shed myself effortlessly

The rain is falling

The rain is bearing news
More efficiently than T.V.

Hisses

Falling out of bed in a fit of wild dreams the rain
Cannot pick itself up ill and
Complains weakly

On the floor, around my shoes, my weakest words would pool

x.

If at the top of the stairs I shed my self effortlessly

Werewolves tonight I fill the pool
With carrot juice and something rose
Only an inch deep so far and the rest
Of them off to the movies

Too diluted: its potency
Is doubtful. How to affect death
To the werewolf?

So where shall I hide
From the wereworld. Under the
Bed in the corridor the bed at the
Window the cold and crystal window under
The bedframe between the springs and the mattress
Between mattresses like a penny

In the deeper past of my standard self, a roll of coins

My metallic equivalent

I drank from flasks then the Calvinist water
From any spring

xi.

One row of red curtains: the third floor of the school
The middle floor the line of symmetry the centered horizon
Red and weightless

Namely mother with the deep line down the center of her belly
Ascribed us to ideas and them to us of course

Silence in the coat room with a migraine
And in the room with the high mahogany bedframe
Mossing underneath it
Near the springs

xii.

I climb the stairs I climb over easily
 Green hills and easy No summit
 To be reached Here a room then

A room A soft white sofa and a man
 Talking on a mobile phone Small
 Passport-sized photos taped to this phone

These are photos of him the man talking

“The phone,” he says, “is dirty but we cannot find
 the correct soap. Have you seen the soap? We cannot find the soap

The phone” he says “is blocked, clogged, is furred up
 With images” and as I get closer I see

He is a photo a life-sized photo he is
 A screen glowing green

xiii.

The walk is divided in two parts;
One reaches a first T junction
And then another.
Every window is closed to the cold,
Surface is both numb and mute.

A prophet lies dead and naked on the grass in front of us, and I am alone in choosing to sit down.

I sit at a forking of the ritual:
Having followed the stream to a boulder and then
Forgotten the stream.

It is uncommon to have the object of destination in sight; one does not walk down a road towards something that lies in the middle of it.

Death is an orange fruit, plastic-wrapped, a little bruised, but for a long while untouched.

My dreams once again slip from memory. A house burns down.

xiv.**Still.**

A stopped watch. Soft time soft ache in the eyelids, shovels, the eyelids are a feverish green. The fever is a dark green vegetable, darker than spinach or rapini. There the little baby feet, pummeling the green. There guilt in dreams. The feet in the eyes, the silent: kicking over of a fever. Here. Read over kicked over darker than tea on the hem of the green overalls and the tears that resulted from contact with the tea. I do not mean to write with brevity or of mysteries.

Steal.

My first memory has nothing to do with strollers or cribs or other baby machinery. In this memory I am standing at the top of a tall stairway, beside a table and a blue vase, massive objects. Is there an adult at the bottom of the stairs? My father, in particular, was tall, because he never bent to our height or slowed down his walk for us or made any concessions. To my mother I confessed my fear, I fall.

Til/l.

To turn over, to wait for, a cash register, the turning of, the transition from then to now, from now to then, to recess. A pit in the earth. A throat.

xv.

My first memory is a set of stairs.

No escape, the set of stairs leading up to no floor.

The timber walls flanking it

are imposingly thick and together they make the stairway narrow. I must move straight and thin as an officer's whistle to ascend. Water-cracked and bald, the timbers are residue of a beached ship.

Here, ascending from no water to over

no water,

memory gives me purpose and frames.

It is not an escape.

There is no escape.

For those who feel the need to escape.

The river is the hum of a machine, under glass

I read, as a young girl, with a wild appetite. I preferred reading to sleeping at night. The pale yellow pages flickered in and out of sight like the wolf's teeth in the dream. My mother forbade me candles. Candles were obtained illicitly, bought on credit from the servants, so that by the time I was twelve years old I was significantly in debt. With the purpose of directing a forbidden lover to her door, Hero too became indebted for candles. But to whom? Did Aphrodite supply them? When Leander compared his beloved to Aphrodite, the candle flame was quenched, and he drowned in the river, for want of light. They would say the Goddess is angry, that she jealously strikes light out. Because, damp beside the river, their love makes them verge on immortality, a love felt only as the gods must. Or what else is it that necessitates their fall to the base element that separated them? Why turn them down to the death machine? Whose debt cleared?

She Fell out of Bed

ash the journalists inquired **Hero** replied simply that she fell o
 so to adore him form worship **Hero** without stories to evoke herse
 editions of the poetic tale **Hero** and Leander by the grammarian
 estos hight.at Sestos dwelt **Hero** the fair whom young Leander e
 ected every night instead of **Hero** every night he was expecting m
 e meant lust decided to fire **Hero** to exile her from the tower. I
 s this your water or is that?**Hero**'s nurse asked her and splashed
 one glass into the other for **Hero** can't have two waters. By last
 any town magistrate banished **Hero** unchaste from her tower before
 falling out kept Leander far?**Hero** waning at the window for days
 fell out of love? they asked.**Hero** said that she fell out of bed.
 o how the journalists repeat **Hero** was virgin or prostitute as if
 bed was all, as if water and **Hero**'s lovers could be countable
 orgotten he that swam toward **Hero** compared her to the goddess.

Under the Television Broadcast of the Volcano

I sat on the floor beneath the television exploding with Popocatepetl
and drank Christmas Eve beer as black as a night without stars

like Leander in his after-life, searching the plazas and hotels,
no longer knowing what he's looking for. In the plaza

across the street, musicians leaned on trumpets, excavating
joyless noise with those brass throats, and their downtown buttons

shone, like the streetlamp, which had replaced a star.
I tugged the curtain to, with strength, undressed and swam

into the blanketing television, toward that molten heat of lava,
that globular adam's-apple; but I was tossed back and forth

like a blood cell when the vein erupts, and though I knew
that soon your heart would be black again, basalt,

I sought you in that moment, when
all your years emerged on that horizon.

We were to be Queens

We were to be queens, she and I, of two lands by none yet seen.

Ourselves upright as cliffs.

Below, the sea centupling pebbles grey and green in its sway.

We say, fire, with our feet, ignite.

And the sea's dousing does little.

We will be queens and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

She's pointing. See that tower across the water? Where the land juts out and the drop is steeper? Criminals were thrown from there. All sorts of wings and birds attached to them. Fishing boats waited in the water to collect them, to take them away. To break the fall, to take them into exile. Birds tied to them.

Her eyes.

Inland to a village and further in to a labyrinthine cemetery.

Inland without kings and deeper in.

The cemetery closed us in its sculptures, and made of us memories, underlaid with the names of mosses and the colours of rain.

We stayed so long the silence.

There was an image of her become a tree.

Fungus where her breast had been. A chipped shelf. Onto which fledglings dropped.

Eggs nested in her eyesockets.

In here. Locked in the roots I know there are queens.

When the seawind clears the cliff, I feel my skin respond and she.

Sit down beside her on a tombstone: the shape of a bench, or the shape of a cliff.

This is our hand, both stone and what lives.

House Arrest

she is before a door.

before a door, she is adored.

for her, not the door, but what is behind a door,

for she is not before a door, but

is adored.

for her, what is behind the door,

for she is not before a door, but

before a doorway and there

there are many dancing.

but she more frequently

is not dancing. she is before

a hall and there, many dancing

figures couple.

she crouches,

not watching dancing, not dancing.

before a door that is not a doorway

for her frequently.

Notes

From Ropewalk, The Louise Labé Poems

p. 4 The definition of *Ropewalk* is from <http://www.hyperdictionary.com>. Any technical description of rope-making processes is indebted to <http://www.rope-maker.com>.

A very thorough study of Louise Labé's life & collection of her work is *Oeuvres* (I & II), edited by Charles Boy. Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1968. (Réimpression de l'édition de Paris, 1887, 2 vol.).

p. 11 The two sonnets in question (as they appear on <http://www2.ac-lyon.fr/enseigne/lettres/louise/lyon/magny.html>):

O beaus yeus bruns, ô regards
destournez,
O chaus soupirs, ô larmes expandues,
O noires nuits vainement atendues,
O jours luisans vainement retournez :

O tristes pleins, ô desirs obstinez,
O tems perdu, ô peines despendues,
O mille morts en mille retz tendues,
O pires maus contre moy destinez.

O ris, ô front, cheveux, bras, mains et
doits :
O lut pleintif, viole, archet et vois :
Tant de flambeaus pour ardre une
femmelle !

De toy me plein, que tant de feus
portant,
En tant d'endroits d'iceus mon coeur
tatant,
N'en est sur toy volé quelque estincelle.

Louise Labé, Sonnet II.

O beaus yeus bruns, ô regards destournez,
O chaults soupirs, ô larmes expandues,
O noires nuicts vainement attendues,
O jours luisans vainement retournez :

O tristes pleints, ô désirs obstinez,
O tens perdu, ô peines despendues,
O mille morts en mille retz tendues,
O pires mauux contre moy destinez.

O pas epars, ô trop ardente flame,
O douce erreur, ô pensers de mon âme,
Qui ça, qui là, me tournez nuit et jour

O vous mes yeux, non plus yeux mais
fontaines
O dieux, ô cieus et personnes humaines,
Soyez pour dieu tesmoins de mon amour.

Olivier de Magny, *Les Souspirs*, Sonnet
LV.

Notes

From Ninth Month

p. 25 The epigraph is taken from Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

From Mountance of a Dream

p. 37 "a common whore" John Calvin ascribed to Louise Labé the epithet "plebeia meretrix." Writes Frank Warnke, in *Three Women Poets*, "...what was the sour theocrat of Geneva to make of a beautiful woman, a Catholic, who presided over a salon frequented by learned and creative men, who wrote passionate love poetry that shows no trace of a sense of guilt, and who, worst of all, was in the habit of wearing male attire."

p. 46 *No Escape* is the title of the installation by Louise Bourgeois that inspired this poem.

From We were to be Queens

p. 50 The title for this poem is a translation of Gabriela Mistral's *Todas Ibamos A Ser Reinas*.