

Outrageous Horizon

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Translated from the French by Frank Wynne



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Prologue



We cannot know the taste of pineapple
by listening to travellers' tales

ONE NIGHT, LONG AGO – I don't quite remember when – as we left a bar, a tipsy friend said with feigned gravity: 'We cannot know the taste of pineapple by listening to travellers' tales.' We were standing in the middle of an alley somewhere between the rue de la Grange-aux-Belles and the rue Saint-Maur in the tenth arrondissement of Paris, a little the worse for wear, and I remember I stopped, I laughed, then I walked on towards Belleville. I was living in a building on the corner of the rue de la Fontaine-au-Roi and the rue du Moulin Joly, at the point where the tenth and eleventh arrondissements meet. The building faces a derelict multi-storey car park; there is nothing on either side of the courtyard, so, from a distance, it looks a little like an ocean liner. A rented apartment we had been handing down from brother to brother for about ten years without the lease or the rent ever changing. The first handed on to the next, leaving his place to his younger brother, and so on. The two-room apartment was furnished with oddments randomly gathered during peregrinations, and marked by home improvements undertaken for the band of brothers – a library in the hallway, a chest mounted on the ceiling, a leather armchair nicknamed the *pocket-emptier*, a clothes-shop mannequin with no clothes, a tricolour stolen from the entrance to a town hall, a neon sign from a Chinese restaurant with every other letter missing. From the window, we suspended a pink tricycle found during a night on the tiles, and this served as a figurehead for our ocean liner-cum-apartment block. I had arrived home late and, before I went to bed, had scrawled my friend's words on a slip of paper:

We cannot know the taste of pineapple by listening to travellers' tales.

I like these pithy phrases that say everything without saying anything, those futile maxims whose hollowness becomes evident the moment they are inverted, the paradoxes pinned over desks. Honestly, this is exactly what I did as soon as I woke up: I pinned it on

the corkboard over my desk, between a photograph of Walter Benjamin bought from the German bookshop Marissal Bücher (now gone) and an aphorism by Ambrose Bierce: *A rabbit's foot may bring good luck to you, but it brought none to the rabbit.* I forgot the phrase, but it stayed with me. During one of my moves, I found a brown paper envelope containing a number of Polaroids, postcards and scraps of paper, and there it was. On the reverse, I had noted the date: 12 June 2004.

When I discovered the stories of Nicolas Bouvier, I remember thinking how perfectly the maxim hit home; even the most faithful and inspired account could, at best, offer only a counterfeit of the real, and would stop short when it came to sensation. And yet, one line, one carefully fashioned phrase, gave the lie to the maxim, contradicted it for a moment: *Without this detachment, this transparency, how can one hope to show what one has seen? Become reflection, echo, breath of wind, guest who sits mute at the end of the table before uttering a word.* It was from *The Scorpion-Fish*, and it was luminous. I jotted it down in a notebook, this was in January 2007, and I reread it recently.

In May 2014, a friend invited me to the theatre. A performance, he explained, not real actors, but artists from various disciplines meeting on stage; it was in Vitry, on a Friday at 8.30 p.m. The artist in question was André S. Labarthe, who created the documentary series *Film-makers of Our Time*. I had nothing planned that evening, and I went. Outside the theatre, the title was writ large: WE CANNOT KNOW THE TASTE OF PINEAPPLE BY LISTENING TO TRAVELLERS' TALES. You couldn't make it up. In the programme, I read: *The title, borrowed from Leibniz, reveals all the difficulty but also all the zest of experience.* I was amused that it had never occurred to me to track down the author of this phrase, so convinced had I been that it was just drunken late-night showboating, one my friend had probably since forgotten, a clever throw-away remark. The back of the programme read:

1. *One does not need to be old to tell one's life story.*
2. *To imagine recounting one's life from A to Z is a tangential activity, a manner, by means of fiction, of elevating one's biography to the status of art.*

3. *If fiction is me, is non-fiction other people?*
4. *All (bi)story contains an element of fiction.*

If this were a philosophy, I would subscribe to it, especially point three. In the middle of the stage, was an elongated bubble of transparent plastic about eight metres wide, onto whose inner surface videos were projected that accompanied the story being read or played out. Strangely, it was quite funny.

After the performance, I went straight home without staying for a drink, to track down the precise source of the quote and read the whole passage. It was from *New Essays on Human Understanding* – and took the form of an imaginary dialogue between Philalethes and Theophilus, one an empiricist, the other a rationalist, in which Leibniz responds to the theses of Locke. The phrasing was different and the conclusion more astonishing: *We cannot know the taste of pineapple, for example, by listening to travellers' tales, unless we can taste things by the ears* – like *'Sancho Panza, who had the faculty to see Dulcinea by hearsay', or like the blind man who, having often heard scarlet described as a blazing colour, thought that it must be 'like the sound of a trumpet'*. I thought, perhaps this is what the novel is, perhaps this is what memory is.

Another apartment, another desk, and above it, pinned to a different corkboard, a photograph – on the high seas, the sun is rising over a number of faces, in the centre is a woman, arms dangling, her expression cheerful, her pose mimicking the lurching of the boat while, behind her, an elegant, neatly coiffed man wearing braces and shirtsleeves is looking away from the camera, staring at some higher point; two hats, one looks to be made of straw, the other is a sort of panama; in the foreground, half out of frame, is a child of two or three dressed in shorts. Alone, on the far left, a man stands apart from the group, squeezed into a heavy artist's jacket with roomy pockets, he is bringing his hand up to his face, to smoke, to shield his eyes, it is impossible to tell. According to the caption, he is Victor Serge. One figure is turned towards the sea, her hand on the gunwale, her dress and her hair bisected by a band of light (at first glance, it is impossible to say whether the negative has been overexposed, or whether it is a broad beam of sunlight); she is Jacqueline Lamba. The two faces are lost, one staring at his feet, the other gazing out to sea.

I look at this photograph taken on the deck of the ship. There are two, and they are the only ones taken during the crossing. Don't go looking for others, I was told, all you will find are snapshots of mist taken from the quay, as for the rest, it is a strange journey devoid of images. A moment of history attested by official documents and by travellers' tales but shielded from film, one might say, in the blind spot of a century of images. The two negatives can be found on the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; both are credited to Dyno Lowenstein – and they bear the same date: 25 March 1941. Looking at the photograph, I can only dream of sitting down to dinner, of talking to these paper faces who suddenly come to life, talk, answer, offer a true perception of this moment, just one, a fleeting impression that fades as quickly as it appears of being on board, or somewhere above, slightly to one side, or simply elsewhere. We assemble memories, surround ourselves with an array of archives, tinker with them, move them, twist them, bring them together until the door opens just a crack, you grope your way through a room plunged into darkness and, in a thin shaft of light, a theatre comes to life. You take to the sea, you cast off, you set off on a long voyage and perhaps, when you reach the quay, you will have the taste of pineapple in your mouth and landsickness. I noted the date: 21 June 2014.

Part One



Pôvre Merle

*We say that for our civilisation the Atlantic is what the
Mediterranean was for antiquity, an inner sea.*

Victor Serge, *Notebooks*

The Squid

Hangar No. 7
24 March 1941

Beneath a thick black cape, she moved in the darkness, her face haggard and a little wild. From the rue des Catalans, she took the corniche, crossed the gardens of the Pharo Palace, skirted the bassin de Carenage, balancing on the edge, leaving the sun, the Café Ventoux and Le Brûleur de Loups. When she reached 10, cours du Vieux-Port, she glanced up at the offices of Cahiers du Sud, then continued walking to the bustling warehouses at la Joliette filled with empty, upturned casks. At thirty-two, Simone Weil was this shadow shifting beneath the sunlight of Marseilles harbour; her brother André had left the city in January aboard one of these ships. She was living alone, dividing her time between learning Occitan and reading the *Iliad* through the prism of war. People called her strange, quick-tempered, reckless. On the wall of the apartment at 8, rue des Catalans she had pinned a reproduction of Giorgione's *Pastoral Concert*, she slept on the bare floorboards and often, in the middle of the night, swaddled in thin sheets, she would sit out on the terrace overlooking the shore, cleaning the lenses of her round glasses and straining her eyes as she watched the stars mingle with the sea. In the morning, sunlight would blanket her non-existent bed and the island of Frioul would

appear, framed by the window. To the south, the sweeping cove, the Anse des Catalans, and beyond, the vallon des Auffes, the tiny fishing port hidden by the arches of the bridge behind which it nestles; beneath the broad arches, small craft are dragged ashore, hulls scuffed, oars limp; numerous alleyways stretch away towards the headland of Endoume, or to the rocky cove of Malmousque; those who are curious will head northward, towards the memorial, stopping along the way at the Impasse des Beaux-Yeux, which affords brief glimpses of the cityscape. Simone Weil had already lived many lives, in the lecture halls of the university, in factories, on the frontlines of the Spanish Civil War with the Durruti column, where a pot of boiling oil had put an end to her fervour, and soon she too would be on the quays awaiting the departure of a ship, immersing herself in chance encounters, she too would have melted into the maelstrom that jests and sets out its table according to its whim, bringing together the most curious fates, one day a poet, some revolutionaries, one night art dealers, a mathematician, a storm aboard an old tub that has sprung a leak, in the senseless and incessant hiccough of the backwash, in the eddy of events, she will play her role. And the novel is ingenious in that it is formless, its sprawling fields require skilful clearing, it nestles between the multiple strata of history, and once it has accumulated sufficient cargo, the heavy nuggets of anthracite, the engine roars into life, whistles and sends out plumes of smoke, the choo-choo puffs of steam are like the smoke signals of Native Americans: they clear the horizon. Like the dawn steamers on the Mississippi, the sternwheelers, it churns up the river waters, chugging against the current, slapping the snouts of crocodiles, marking time. And it glides between the sun's rays, suspending the breath of time, with every other turn drawing from its folds vast fictions just as algae clings to the steamer paddles, clinging to the rigid structure of truth.

Simone Weil was not leaving on 24 March. Since nine in the morning she had been watching on the quays at cap de la Pinède, near Hangar No. 7, watching the hundreds of men and women of every class who were against the railings of the rusty prow of a cargo ship. Victor Serge knows her and, in his notebooks, attests to her presence: *The port, long wait by the railings. Simone Weil, beneath her heavy laden cloak.*

On 3 December 1940, the city had been transfixed by the visit of Maréchal Pétain. A colossal portrait of the old man stared out over the Vieux-Port and over the cheering jubilant crowds that lined the route of the parade, dressed in their Sunday best, sombre black velvet suits, braid piping, red linings, elegant fedoras or the *chapeaux de Lunel* favoured by Folco de Baroncelli, polished boots made of creaking leather, and Claudine collars for the schoolgirls lined up outside a school that had been hastily renamed the Lycée Philippe-Pétain. Along the route of the parade that set off from the steps of the gare Saint-Charles, people jostled for space as others joined the throng on the harbour quays, thousands of supporters lined the thousands of worn flagstones and the canvas awnings snapped in answer to the tricolours that hung from the windows. The winter had been grim, the snow-covered tarpaulins of the Provençal fishing boats lashed to the piers formed a long powder trail difficult to distinguish from the roiling sea, weighed down by drifts of huge snowflakes, the wispy fleece of a leaden sky. From the balcony of the préfecture, surrounded by a pile of cockades laid in a semi-circle, the Maréchal spoke to the masses, responded to the cheers, throwing his arms wide; his voice, though restrained, rumbled, and his unhinged address stood out against the chaos of the church bells and the parade chants and drowned out the screeching of the gulls above the pylons, the chimneys, the cranes and the narrow wooden jetties between the vessels, far above the skeletal carcasses of boats and the eels twined around the driftwood rudders that strew the depths of harbours. All along the transporter bridge, from the buffet-restaurant by Saint-Nicolas to the newspaper kiosk near Saint-Jean on the far shore, its counterweight bascule of wrought iron winched by machine, a creaking beast of bolts and cable stays, supported by slender steel girders, countless interlocking lines formed a grid soaring to almost eighty metres. Further off, along the breakwater, moored in the coves of la Joliette, Lazaret, Arenc, National and la Pinède, between the hangars of the Société Générale des Transports Maritimes, the ocean liner *Massilia* and the cargo ships *Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle* and *Arizona* had been daubed in red, white and blue, and festooned with banners emblazoned 'Vive

Pétain', stencilled onto reams of canvas, worthy of a village fete – all foreign flags had been removed. At 11 a.m., in the Corniche, in front of the war memorial known as the porte de Poilus-d'Orient, the Maréchal was conversing with his 'fine comrades-in-arms', veterans and disabled ex-servicemen, their faces haggard, whipped by the dry wind, blinded by the winter sun, standing to attention in patched-up uniforms.

At 3 p.m., the disbanded army paraded along the quai des Belges: the armoured cars, the cadets from the military academies of Saint-Cyr and Saint-Maixent, the mountain infantry from Fréjus and Hyères, the cavalrymen of Nîmes, the marines, the mounted riot police, the bicycle infantry, the 43rd Infantry Regiment; an army rendered impotent by armistice, a military farce as powerless as a scout troop at a jamboree.

Around the old almshouse called La Vieille Charité, in the lane-ways and on the place du Panier, the only rush was that of the whirling wind trailing in its wake the fliers and confetti that strewed the gutters. The day had been preceded by sweeping arrests. The riff-raff had disappeared, people said proudly. The usual suspects – Jews, anarchists, foreigners, gypsies, communists, artists – had all been crammed into hurriedly improvised prisons, four days locked up around the city in storehouses, barracks, theatres and ships with six hundred in the hold of the cargo ship *Sinaïa*. Some knew that these first raids heralded others; the dissidents from the East saw them as an omen; they knew the vocabulary of tyranny, internments, exterminations, deportations, they knew that the persecution, the complicit silence, the blind obedience to orders would steadily increase until the day came when it was too late, when escape would mean life or death. Driven back to a rock or a hard place, to the Pyrenees or the Mediterranean, forced to choose the route across the mountains or the route across the seas. They were witness to the inexorable movement that leads to an impasse, from the agonies of uncertainty to voluntary uprooting.

Can we ever know how a war begins? The first gunshot, the retreat, the pitched battles – they give way to sporadic sniper fire. On a notepad, scribbled in haste, the solemn account of a captured moment, a fleeting lie, a brash strike that turns from a skirmish to a spearhead. We will be surprised to find that the weather was so

beautiful, to read about the warmth of a night before battle; the slowly gathering autumnal dusk will frame an artillery emplacement like a wedding party, and at dawn, the sun's rays, drunk in with a cup of coffee, will filter and percolate through the leaves, the eyes, tapping out note after note on the skin, taking on the urgency of a mobilised army. Thunder rumbles, we see a nose pressed to the glass, a striated sky, we count the seconds separating the flash from the rumble, the light from the report. One, two, three, four, five, six seconds, then the sky rolls with heavy, muffled echoes, two kilometres, we calculate. It is from here, safe behind the glass, that the looming chaos is best observed, while in the distance the dark device growls and creeps closer in curtains of rain.

If France in 1941 was a funnel, Marseilles was the slender tube; here people rubbed shoulders, desperate for a way out. A chance meeting was now seen not as a joyous coincidence but a tragic inevitability. The sheer number of stateless people compared to the few cafés and hotels where they could congregate meant that the probability of such encounters, like untold throws of loaded dice, all but abolished the notion of coincidence. To leave France entailed securing a valid passport and a series of visas stamped by the harbour authorities before embarking. Hell had a name: the department of paper pushing. In that waiting room, the arbitrary reigned, proscriptions often disappeared only to be replaced by others, more devious. The vice was closing, each parting ship seemed to be the last, at which point the convicts flanked by the gendarmes found themselves fortunate, the zeal of bureaucrats was understood, even appreciated, when, finally, a scrap of paper was stamped, a hand beating on the cover of the logbook like the gavel of a judge delivering a sentence – this was authority, one it would have been foolish to challenge having come so far – and so people bowed their heads, mumbled their names, announced their destinations, stammered a few words of explanation: 'I'm going to join my brother in Mexico', 'My wife is waiting for me in New York', they presented safe conduct, ticket, transit visas, from country of refuge and last point of departure, grateful that there were no more questions, that another stage of the journey had begun, that there would be many other stages no longer mattered: once aboard, on the open sea, Europe would already be far behind.

A rumour spread across the terraces: cargo ships were sailing to the Antilles. There was talk of freighters laden with tons of bananas and sugar going one way, and with hundreds of people going *the other* – phantom ships plying their trade between two continents, which widened the mesh of a narrow net, opening a route to the Americas through the tropics. The solution seemed too facile, people were suspicious, it might be a godsend or it might be a trap. The maxim of those times: trust to your misfortune and mistrust your good fortune. And discussion of this new situation was in veiled terms, in rushed tones, as a digression from a conversation about the weather: this was how word spread that at the passport office in Arles, the elderly lady at the main counter was handing out travel tickets; that at the Mexican Consulate at the far end of La Canebière in Marseilles, the consul, Gilberto Bosques, was handing out visas and safe conducts; that in January seven hundred passengers had taken to sea aboard the SS *Winnipeg*, the same ship chartered by Neruda in 1939 to transport two thousand five hundred Spanish Republicans to Chile, and spare them certain death in Franco's jails. There was already news from the other side that a number of passengers on an English cargo ship had been forced to disembark in Dakar and were now sweltering in a barracks in the middle of nowhere, and that the SS *Wyoming*, which put in on 24 February, had arrived at Fort-de-France. Since December 1940, the government that had been so keen to discourage those wanting to leave was now facilitating the process; orders had been given. By late January, it was possible to get an exit visa – this document, obtained only through the most extraordinary wiles, by disassembling and disarticulating the cogs of the idiotic system, instantly turned into Monopoly money, people all but laughed when presented with it. This was not generosity of spirit, the true reason behind this volte-face could be summed up in two words: good riddance! The Gestapo had already tracked down and arrested many of the dissident refugees in France, with the complicity of the French authorities who had supplied a list of enemies of the Reich still in the country and denied exit visas; as for the rest – the *rabble* – let them flee and contaminate America, that was the

idea. *We could now openly engage in what had all along been our raison d'être: emigration*, remarked an astonished Varian Fry at the Emergency Rescue Committee, which had moved its makeshift office on the rue Grignan to the boulevard Garibaldi to give the association an air of respectability. Within a few months, some fifteen thousand people applied to the association and more than a thousand managed to flee. The source of the waters mattered little, what mattered was that the riverbed was wider.

From 1930 until 1939, the Société Générale des Transports Maritimes à Vapeur – the SGTMV – had operated a quarterly freight service between metropolitan France, the Antilles and French Guiana. A fleet of seven cargo ships – the *Mont-Cenis*, the *Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle*, the *Mont-Kemmel*, the *Mont-Everest*, the *Mont-Genève*, the *Mont-Viso* and the *Mont-Angel* – had been laid up after war was declared. From December 1940, the SGTMV's cargo ships were converted into ocean liners. Meanwhile, other companies bought up rusty old tubs and, at little cost, disguised them as gleaming liners. In the wet docks of the étang de Berre, they repainted the tin cans lead-grey, and patched them up with little more than puncture-repair patches and clapped-out engines – and the ships sailed on! Political affairs (even by association) go hand in hand with business affairs: there is not a single law, not a single decree or directive that does not bolster such an ingenious trade. That is the way of the world: even rescue is a commercial endeavour; you have to be a manager to be an altruist. Persecute the refugees, set up a rescue network and you have a licence to print money: visas, guarantees, privileges, second-class tickets, first-class tickets, cabins, berths, deckchairs, provisions aboard, mind the gangway – a thriving business, a maximised profit and a political administration, like a doting father figure, guided by *strict humanitarian rules*. It is possible to be a refugee and pay for one's salvation, the two go hand in glove, in fact, surely this is what is meant by paying tribute.

It is at the foot of the *Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle* that the crowd has gathered on this morning of 24 March, under the watchful eye of armed, uniformed riot police. The cargo that left Cayenne on 28 January 1940 marked the temporary suspension of commercial

trading between the Antilles and the old world. A vessel of 4,945 tons and an imposing aspect; when one looked up towards the prow, and the sun shrouded the angles in a dazzling halo, it almost looked the part. And indeed, it was a kind of illusion, at the dawn of a great exodus. An ark, nothing less. Some three hundred exiles, escorted by gendarmes, were emerging from Hangar No. 7, moving along the quays, dwarfed by the hulls of the ships, which, swathed in shadow and newly refurbished, had a certain style. Not far away, the *Carimaré* was in dry dock at la Pinède, waiting to be streamlined and refitted, its huge, dry propellers motionless, arse in the wind, a fat man being washed. All around it, the longshoremen were at work, yelling to each other, calling down from the prow to the walls of the dry dock, like an army of men perched on aqueducts, hauling on ropes, securing the metal hulk like the Lilliputians lashing down Gulliver.

From the *Paul-Lemerle*, the *Carimaré* seemed to have been stripped bare, and an observer saw only a series of oily, shapeless forms, nothing more or less than a heap of rusting nuts and bolts atop a stack of rotting planks. A raft piled with scrap metal, a machine bound for the wrecking yard, like a deboned chicken. It was a joke, a pitiful hoax, a risible framework, a cargo ship worthy only of the scrapyards, the flagship of a pantomime fleet. And yet no one would complain before reaching the open sea, people were willing to pay anything for a ticket, and besides, everyone knows that uncertainty is life's ultimate gamble. In single file on the gangway, the procession of trunks and suitcases stripped the scene of its drama, fleeing Russians rubbed shoulders with exiled Spaniards, ethnologists with poets, KPD activists with Soviet renegades and a ginger tomcat with a little girl. The scene now set, thirty days at sea would transform this floating coffin into a treasure chest.

Victor Serge scanned the quay, searching for Laurette and her red flowers. Standing on a timber frame, he saw her, flanked by Jean Gemähling and Dina Vierny, and watched as, within the first mile, her blue overcoat was engulfed by the great blue of the sea, a point pinned onto the horizon. Aboard, sadness and joy. On the forward deck, a happy Polish family. The father, bushy-bearded,

was waving his hands wildly in a parody of heart-breaking farewell and singing ‘Oyfn veg’ – while his two sons shrieked and whirled. A world turned upside down.

The passengers quickly realised why the *Paul-Lemerle* had been nicknamed *Pôvre merle* – poor blackbird.

They could not help but wonder what would be left of the poor bird after the first storm. Apart from the cabins allocated to the crew, four in number, the two hundred and fifty passengers were astonished to discover that the twin holds had been converted into dormitories, each containing about a hundred bunk beds hastily cobbled together by the company’s labourers more accustomed to patching hulls and ships’ timbers – caulkers had spent three days in the belly of the ship, busily constructing two levels with salvaged materials, from timbers salvaged from small crafts to planks found lying around the hangar. This was not the ark described as constructed of *shittim wood*, coated inside and out with *pitch*. This was a shack made of odds and ends, a labyrinth of berths with mattresses of straw, in Second Class and First; in fact, class had ceased to exist. With the exception of those who had secured a cabin – paying three to four thousand francs in hard currency at the counters of the Société des Transports Maritimes – everyone had to fight for a bunk in the stifling hold. Once at sea, the passengers made a fuss, harassed crew members – those they could find: the quartermaster, the steward manning the field kitchen – to no avail. The crew responded to the abuse with threats: you’re free to disembark at the next stop – Oran, in Africa – and after that you can fend for yourself! People settled themselves in the dormitories, unpacked their kit; sitting cross-legged on one of the bunks, a suitcase on his pillow, a boy was thinking about the long sea voyage, about adventure, savouring the tingling feeling in his belly, relishing the excitement of the moment. They would put the past behind them, in the great cleansing of the journey, crossing the equator, even their names would be forgotten. Up on deck, where the Saint-Étienne machine gun and the 90 mm naval guns once stood, three sheds – four planks of mouldering pitch wood – had been nailed together to serve as washhouses; a standing tap dripped and