

JOURNALS: THE PARIS NOTEBOOK 2015

November 8

Lucinda and I raced through two days of tasks and lists—finances, student comments, picking up this and dropping off that—before departing for our two-week travel to Paris. We had an hour to spare on the day of departure. Luce said, “Let’s just stop at this EMS & look around.” So I bought a teal fleece vest, nicely fitted to the waist & cut long to the hips which is flattering to my short and somewhat stocky build. She bought a running jersey, sky blue, long sleeve, zippered at the throat. Such American icons of fashion about sports & the outdoors & comfort, signifying our New England heritage perhaps, our outdoorsmanship. The irony of course is that we are going to Paris in search of Louisa de Saint- Isle/ Dalmond/ Bregny, my great grandmother who was a dressmaker to Empress Eugenie in the Second Empire & traveled to NYC as a young woman to establish an haute couture salon. Well, that’s not really the truth. She travelled from Paris to settle in Mexico City, but by the time her ship arrived in New York she learned it was no longer safe for the French to travel to Mexico. The people had risen up against the occupation, the French were being murdered.

In France the term “haute couture” is constrained by some bureau in charge of institutional control of such things—as my student Thomas Dai, a student of fashion who knows more about this than I do, informed me. But I intend to seek out the past sense of fashion in Louisa’s time & my own from childhood to present--& to monitor my own adornment as we go. Today I wear skinny black stretch pants, chic black boots, low-heeled with a couple of decorative buckled straps running low on the ankle—vibrant blue plaid flannel shirt—teal fleece vest—2 rings—on left middle finger Zuni mosaic ring bought in Denver airport, on right Navajo turquoise ring in shape of baguette that I bought in Prescott, AZ, and a lime green pashima bought this morning from Tibetan street vendor in Portland, ME. A tiny amount of female flare in an otherwise gender neutral (prefer “androgynous”) get-up. I have distrusted femininity though there are examples of powerful women in my family who embraced it.

Let me pick her up and bring her with me, the 3 year old me, the criss-cross white pique strapped aqua dress with her towhead curls, the 5 year old in pinto pony cowgirl vest and skirt, the 9th grader in black & tweed straight skirt & pink cotton crew neck sweater, the 16 year old in yellow chiffon prom dress Marie remade for me from a thrift store find (The Clothes Horse in Hartford, a consignment shop where my mother loved to shop) and the 17 year old in the Grace Kelly elegant cranberry bell skirt pick scalloped neck bodice satin dress I made for senior prom, the night I likely conceived my brilliant and beloved daughter who travels with me now to Paris to seek our matrilineal line. I stitched that dress on the Singer treadle machine that was Marnie’s—its black cast iron body & foot treadle, dark oak frame, gold filigree trimming---oh, how I loved knowing the mechanical workings of bobbin and needle and gear wheel strapped with leather belt. The dress I wore the night I got pregnant with Lucinda. I knew and trusted my feminine beauty as a sexual force I refused to deny.

To think now nearing 70 of all I have been—all the women I have been—makes me weep. Joy & loss & so much tenderness buried in my drive to accomplish.

Day One, Paris

When our taxi pulls up to Hotel Henriette on the cobblestone Rue des Goblins, Luce jumps out to greet a tall man in floppy straw hat—Doug Ashford, an artist & former teacher she knows from her MFA days. What are the odds? He's in Paris for a few days—then a show in, where? Rotterdam? Staying at the same hotel. That's the first of the uncanny moments. Our hotel is small bohemian boutique—brightly painted, small, a courtyard with 3 tables & a breakfast room with eight tables. The guests are all French. I keep saying por favor when I should say s'il vous plais.

We agree that we will avoid sleeping after the long, cramped flight. We could crash, but agree to power through until 8 or 9 PM before lying down in our beds. So we walk, agreed too that we will plan but we will also wander. The day—walking through Le Mouffetard (5th arrondissement), fairly quiet on a Monday—then wandering toward the river—a bite of gruyere crepe then espresso—then finding ourselves staring at Notre Dame—went in, gawked, prayed, lit a candle for Louisa, and climbed up to the chimera gallery looming 46 meters above the ground.

Then the 2nd uncanny thing—a fashion shoot in our tiny lobby—white lights (klieg?) and a woman (wrist model?) having her braceleted wrists photographed—electrical wires vining the floor and fancy cameras bolted to their armature.

Luce described the stillness as “a tomb of fashion seriousness.”

At breakfast she is reading a history of Paris fashion—how the dresses got so low cut in the early 1800s, the nipples showed. The English raised the design to be more modest. No nipples allowed. The English feared the licentiousness of the French. And we, a veritable Norman invasion in our genes, are trying to make sense of who we are.

Louisa would have worshipped at Notre Dame, heard the massive organ pipes fill the cavernous nave, billow until the walls pressed against the flying buttresses (why hide what holds you up?). She would have lifted her eyes to the great rose window, she would have confessed here---what?

She would have left here—France with its flat land & cultured streets & villages for a rugged world—a poor & crowded new city promising commerce for all--a rough unsettled continent still warring with itself over its creed—she would have seen her 3 daughters leave the Catholic faith & find solace in the embrace of Mary Baker Eddy's feminist religious revolution, Christian Science.

Construction on Notre Dame began in 1163---it took 200 years to build. Taken from the Church and grown dilapidated during the French Revolution. In 1802, returned to the Church—repairs & restoration began in 1845 until 1864. Louisa came of age in just those years, a time of renewal

and building. In her childhood restorers would have worked, the chimeras would have been added. Designed by Viollet-Le-Duc—the chimera gallery—the most famous is the stryga. Contemplative. Head in hands, wings and horns aloft, tongue protruding. I remember learning in Prague that the Vatican has a special office for approving chimeras allowed on cathedrals. The intent is to say to demons, don't try entering the premises. The demons are already here.

Fashion creates a political performance.

Day 2, Paris

I have breakfast with Doug. Luce takes a 12 mile run, joins the “moustache race” to raise money for prostate cancer. She runs in honor of my brother who died from the disease four years prior to our visit.

I've hired a research assistant to help my sleuthing. The keepers of the birth records tell her that de Saint Isle is not a common name in France. Maybe Louisa took her mother's maiden name as marketing. I've heard too that the “de” suggests upper class. We are looking for a birth record for her around 1836 or 37. It is so hard to reconstruct the history—everywhere I go turns into a blind alley—all these women, no stories.

I make lists:

Argenteuil (one record suggests she was born there—the home too of Abelard & Heloise)
Museum of Decorative Arts, Department of Fashion & Textile
Bibliothèque Fournay—artisan/craft work

Paris Fashion magazines or catalogs, 1860s

Garnier Opera house

Doug: Moses & Aaron, the divine has to be in real

Bastille Opera House

Museum of the Hunt

What night was it that we stumbled on the Basque restaurant while heading from the Seine back towards the 5th arrondissement. A white Basque wine from Irouleguy—on Spanish border, domain Abotia (?). I have a tin of sardinillas, roasted potatoes la terroir. Luce has calamari & chorizo made from gizzards. The French are not shy of eating parts we refuse—as a child my mother had calf brains & eggs cooked by her French mother.

The Illustrated Fashion Press

1785—1st fashion periodical, Le Cabinet des Modes

1797-Journal des dames des modes

And such publications exploded

Publication of National Library, 2005—special issue & Louvre, 2007 new major history of fashion

** *Ready to Wear, Ready to Work*, Fashion in Paris & NY, Nancy Green

Wednesday: Carnavalet—link to life in Paris 1800s; then Compeigne

Comedie Francaise: still make costumes by hand using older methods; model with white muslin (toile)

Take 7 Line: Gobelins to Gare de Nord

Departing Gare de Nord at 10:19—Intercities train (SNCF)---past trains, graffitied walls—industrial & electrical complexes—when I buy my ticket I'm told my carbon footprint—tall boxes of apartments....

Strains of Marie's songs in my childhood

La Plume de ma tante ette le bureau de mon uncle, le papier de mon uncle ette le bureau de ma tante.

Frere Jacques...Sonny "lemontina," din don din

My grandfather's clock

Thru suburbs and agricultural fields—misty windows—vast vast fields of what may be cabbages

A young spindly plantation of trees & then French countryside—irregular growth that says nature has been left some of her random joy

There is no history of these women.

So very many skillful & accomplished & specialized artisans

Of the MX occupation we get soldiers in history but what of the artisans who created the tools, the uniforms, the performance of aristocracy & power. Saddle maker, leatherer, seamstress, cobbler, black smith.....

Wooded hills—sense of protection that goes animal deep in the psyche---village.

But what protection was there here for animals kept for the royal hunt—a melee of passion for the chase—hundreds came out from Paris—the arousal of it must have been unbearable—all dressed to the nines---then the seamstresses hanging out together & joking—the emperor split his

pants, yes, he was so hard he split his pants & she would not let him have her. He blamed it on a feint executed by his mount at the sight of a rabbit but we had all seen the bulge in his pantaloons grow more desperate as the week bore on—that pansy ass---& when she came into our salon to be dressed for the ball she told them what she'd told him. Make me empress & I'll make you-- then acted the virgin at the ball, that spirited huntress who knew her prey.

Why do women leave?

 Their mothers make them

 Their fathers make them

 Their bosses make them

 They make themselves

The vast class of artisans who served this huge European ruling class as they roved from chateau to chateau in sumptuous ostentation

What infrastructure then went to Mexico City?

On train to Compiègne—the chateau north of Paris where Eugenie was courted by Napoleon III. She was a vivacious & bold Spanish woman, also a pragmatic & strategic one. While many thought N3's attraction to her was a misalliance—she was an “adventuress” & gold-digger—he was irrepressibly drawn to her erotic energy. This chateau became their autumn palace during his reign. During ride in forest...

During courtship, N3 at Fontainebleau gave E a horse; at Compiègne his ardor rose as did the bawdy jests... horseback in the woods. Ruling families stretched from. . . (see Eugenie...)--- natural that the lions & mice existed. She was not aristocracy.

They may have come here by boat up the Seine.

Women given horse then was like being given car now. The seduction of wealth & power.

Cobblestones laid by the poor.

The Royal Hunt: forest built in series of octagons—series of maps

Minerva between Apollo & Mercury

The library: wall of gilt books (all confiscated after the 2nd Empire)—the books here now gifts of Russian aristocracy visiting later

E has music & tea room—restored in 2nd Empire

9 pieces of tapestry—illustrated the royal hunt—woven at Gobelin---1736-46—designed by Jean Baptiste Oudry

King Louis 15 favorite dogs

Paintings of dogs 1728

Grand chase in forest

Over dozen dogs—several dog men on horseback

Ceiling—“Victories of the military genius”

Marcello; Adele d’Affry 1836-79 Duchesse de Castiglione Colonna; a painter.

Horses trotted under grand canopy laced over with vines as far as I can see—colonnades of sculpted sycamores

I am blown away by the scale of wealth, density of people—hundreds at a hunting party—the antechamber lined with chairs, a cornucopia brocade--only the Empress could sit on armchairs—others for straight back chairs...

Heirarchy of chairs, who cd sit where & in

ON RETURN INTERCITIES TRAIN—hoping I am on the train to Paris, as woman asks me in French if we are headed to Paris—I tell her yes. I’d already noticed her—small, lean, attractive, black, narrow Mohawk on shaved head—silver earrings—black leather fem stylized biker jacket—jeans all pocked with fashion tears==as if plaid—we joke we will be lost together—Let me ask someone in my bad French—her accent very thick---hard to hear?—English? French—maybe she’s slurring a bit. Later she asks can she sit with me. Yes, She joins.

Mother died of AIDS, ½ sister.. Went back to Kenya—family didn’t want to know her. Grew up in London. Kenya. Here to go back to Somalia.....

You’ve had a hard life—I’m sorry..

You don’t need to be sorry

Later—because of what we talked about...I’m a stripper (strip-ah).. don’t judge me. I’m sorry she says.

You don’t need to be sorry.

We embrace. Gone.

Forney

Box 1, 1862

A lace department has recently been added to the houses.

Lists of products advertised—silk, cottons, linens

Fashion also is politically active in its own way since the trip of N3 into Algeria

--oriental costume, sequins, golden crescents...Fall fashions create a dress—

“will blow your eyes: (eblouira les yeux)—dazzle

African dress embellished with golden sequins, bands of black taffeta—the cut of the dress is strange—you will think it is impossible.

Another sensation, the Pompeii dress.

The beasts & the insects are in vogue

“So audacious you don’t know how far it will go”

The woman’s body a canvas, she becomes a work of art...a sculptural armature for the world’s bizarre extravagance & beauty

LENGTH OF A DRESS AS STATEMENT OF PRIVILEGE: a boast—streets then full of horseshit & sewage

FRANCO-AMERICAN FASHION MAG 1902 LE MIROIR DES MODES

Every village had dressmaker—did not go into church without a hat, very immodest, an infidel, hat maker in town—this from a man doing research beside us---his mother had their clothes made—even people of modest means—his other had her dresses made, everyone had their dressmakers

We are in the Salle Marianne Delacroix....

Grands Magasins de la “Ville de Paris” 1879—the huge stores

FABRICS:

1876-77 Labbey & Cie a Lyon: fabric catalogue with strip samples---thin merinos & cashmeres dyed in Lyon. Strips 3 inches long and $\frac{3}{4}$ wide pasted into rectangular window. Box of 6000 fabric samples and album of engravings with models—400 colors of silk

Cashmire Diamont

“Dust resistant” (diamond pattern weave)

Alpaca- rough

Indian cashmere—like skin

1872 LININGS:

Great Yorkshire Co—manuf. Mohairs cretonnes (cretonies?) alpacas

Fringes, bows etc. manufactured in another vendor & sold separately from fabrics

Au Bon Marche—dept stores began under N3.

1855 Les Grands Magasins au la Louvre

grand reading room

2 life size mannikins

Sewing boxes

All catalogues with engraved plates—another artisanal group, the printers

“bon marche” means inexpensive & entirely trustworthy—that’s our motto

1889 Bon Marche had mail order catalog---half-sewn dresses—

Corsets named La Sirene (mermaid) and Jeanne d’Arc

Special coats for going out to the ball...free delivery

Grands magasins du Printemps

“In spring everything is new, fresh, and pretty as the name suggests”

Dress: “Fauvette” –a little wild

Hirondelle—dress name

Sold separately:

Fil anglais

Passementerie cousue

Franges & effites

Ceintures

Summer 1880

Sale (even now—they only allowed to take tax break for 2 sales in year)

“clients from the provinces & foreigners,” as well as those from Paris...

Stores in former palaces

It is the end of the aristocracies built on ruling class—consumerism taking over & reaching its apotheosis in our time

Au Tapis Rouge: has workshop with 40 women—for costume comprende

*Special edition of Grands Magasin de Louvre 1830 – 1870—marbled cover

Mercerie sewing supplies; sewing kits in box of cartonage.

Baleine

Soutache—black silk seam binding

1881 DRESSES BEGIN TO HUG FORM...

1888 Costumes for hunting & bicycling (with short skirt)

Country women came to store & fitting room & leave looking like a high class lady provided she is pretty & _____

Café deux magots: the café is all that's left of the big dept store

1867 first mail order catalogs

1860—le bon marche invented delivery/ FREE ENTRY FIXED PRIZE/ POSSIBILITY OF RETURNS

AS FAS AS A HORSE... CONGO IN PARIS & SUBERBS

The wealth, the ostentation, the numerousness of the wealthy at balls, parties, hunts. It was without shame.

Eugenie: Countess of Montijo & Countess of Teba “belonged to a close knit international ruling class which in those days stretched from London to St. Petersburg & from Stockholm to Naples. Its common language was French. Her mother a matchmaking maven—she less so & distrusting after losing—meandering about Europe”

1848—the monarchy of K. Louis-Phillippe swept away by “Revolution of Contempt”—King escaped in cap—whiskers shaved off & wearing dark glasses—crossed Channel as “Mr Smith , an English tourist”

N3 elected for 3 years, in coup d’etat got another 10—Emperor a hereditary title

Since 1789 the French “addicted to revolutions”

Nap3 son of Louis Bonaparte, King of Holland & Empress Josephine’s daughter—L-N: “priapic,” “pathological lecher” with a rich English courtesan as “semi-official mistress” -- description of him p. 27

AFTER THE ATTACKS:

Gray sky, a pall of mourning, fear, defiance hangs over Paris.

State of emergency across France—attacks at restaurant, soccer match, rock concert.

“They shot at us like we were birds.”

We bought that very night my leather tote made in London and Lucinda’s sexy taupe boots.

LETTER FROM PARIS. 13th arrondissement

Soft targets

They shot at people like we were birds

Hotel lobby & breakfast room crammed

We sit with a young couple from Singapore—1st time in Paris, arrived yesterday

Stadium, concert, restaurant.

Friday 13th of November

Explosive belts & kalishnakovs

Walking & walking—musee de la mode to Les Halles to Le Marais

Then dinner at Olio Pane Vino.

Nor sirens, stay indoors

Singing Marseillaise as left stadium (?)

Tying black ribbon to Fr flag.

French way of life—open, multicultural city

By noon—Gatwick Airport closed—suspicious article found in north terminal

Someone rolls a grand piano out on the street and plays “Imagine”

near the site of concert hall—now mortuary vans & world news media... lined up.

The barbarians will not defeat us

6 ATTACKS

All cultural institutions closed per minister of culture—state of emergency in Europe

3 days of national mourning

Dinner at La Sirocco.

Herring in Basque, French, Italian & Moroccan restaurants—THAT BOUNTY

IAN MCEWAN POST

5000 gone to Syria & returned to Paris—get smuggled in with refugees.

The city—a pause (Jenn)

Joie de vivre

Mal de couer

PARIS ADDENDUM: written on note pad

Lucinda bought a copy of Vogue at Logan. I have never bought a copy of Vogue & when she started doing this in college, I looked at the act with concern that her interests & intelligence would veer from accomplishment, which I admit I valorize (to be of use!), to the impossible task of living up to airbrushed perfection & wild surmises of high fashion. My fears were groundless, I see now when she is 50 and I on the verge of 70. We've made very different choices—yet she's both accomplished and fashionable. In fact I've long envied her fashion sense, a woman who can toss on a bargain tapestry skirt & black tee & look like a million bucks. (Why do I say that? Money isn't the measure of my values or hers, though we both enjoy earning enough to enjoy). She hates her body, as all women do. Well, not Nana, the plump, unshaven & unmasked whore of Zola's demimonde, the very Paris of my great-grandmother. My daughter on the other hand is lean a muscular—a runner, serious athlete, with fair skin & long black/brown hair. A fair features face with the proportion & balance that speaks of beauty. A spirit that shines beneath the skirt—just a wee bit of make-up, she says, brushing on a wisp of eye shadow that sets her dark eyes off like stage lites. What she hates is the scar on her abdomen—the long caterpillar that crawls down her belly, still taut & stretch mark free after bearing 2 sons. I love the caterpillar—mark of her surviving an appendectomy at age 9—the tissue of the infected organ having dissolved & infected her abdomen so the excision needed to be longer than customary for this operation—a drain inserted at the lower end—segment of latex tube to keep the contaminants flowing out. I love the caterpillar & think, thank you to the force of life & the surgeon who saved her. I hate my abdomen, a battleground, after bearing her when I was 18, the substrate skin of my youth ripping into gullies that never heal no matter how many times the epidermis renews itself. The biggest tears are along the lower two sides—a violence to my pristine flesh as her head passed down and out.

I asked Lucinda in buying the Vogue back in college, what was she drawn to?

--an "illicit" thing—against my values--guilty pleasure

"You were sort of emphatically against that sort of thing"

Who me?

"I don't think you know what a hardass you were as a feminist."