Quartet:
Translations from *Alléluiapour une femme-jardin*

by

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About the Author

René Depestre was born in 1926 in Jacmel, Haiti. Primarily known for his poetry, he published his first collection of poems, Étincelles, in 1945. In 1946, he helped organize and took part in the student revolution that overthrew Haitian president Elie Lescot. Depestre’s participation led to his arrest and exile to Paris, where he studied at the Sorbonne. In Paris, he also met and collaborated with members of La Négritude, a literary movement started in response to French colonial racism by black Francophone writers. Négritude began to form during the 1920s and 1930s and was partially inspired by the Harlem Renaissance. Other members included poets Léon-Gontran Damas and Aimé Césaire. For a time, Depestre lived in Cuba and was a supporter of its revolution. He worked in Fidel Castro’s Ministry of Foreign Relations, but later left the country to return to Paris in 1978.

Depestre published his most famous work, Un arc-en-ciel pour l’Occident chrétien in 1967. He branched out to prose with his first novel Le Mat de Cocagne in 1979, followed by Alléluia pour une femme-jardin in 1980, which was awarded the short story Prix Goncourt in 1982. Today Depestre lives in France, where he is a UNESCO special envoy for Haiti.
**Introduction**

Translating Francophone literature is far from new, but the lack of translation of Franco-Caribbean literature in particular is what partially motivated me to choose a work by René Depestre. After I took *Poets and Playwrights of Négritude*, a seminar taught by my thesis advisor Norman Shapiro, I fell in love with the powerful imagery used by the writers of the Négritude movement, especially the imagery within Depestre’s poetry collection *Étincelles*, because he synthesized his voices of a poet proud of his home country and of a poet marginalized by mainstream French literature into one.

Even though I really wanted to translate Depestre, the thought of translating his poetry seemed daunting. I have an appreciation of poetry, but I could not see myself being able to competently translate it, as it requires a sensitivity that I did not think that I possessed. The translation of poetry requires the translator to pay attention to the sound, form and meaning of the original. It soon became obvious to me that prose translations also require this same sensitivity. It could be just as difficult as a poetry translation, and probably even more difficult, because you are obligated to remain within the confines of the original author’s work, but are given the responsibility to make it your own at the same time. Translation is actually an exercise in creative freedom. Prof. Shapiro often referred to it as, “the art of choice.” Keeping this in mind, I spent the summer before senior fall doing “research” by reading two
different translations of *The Iliad*, to pick up any of the differences in the translators’ approaches. There were quite a few, but the most glaring came in the translator’s rigidity in his use of language. I quickly perceived that this could make or break my translation, and resolved that I would be as “free” as possible when it came time for me to translate this work. That was, of course, easier said than done. I, being afraid of crossing the line that separates translation from adaptation, tried to stay too close to the original, and thus ended up stifling its lyricism in the process.

A lot of the difficulties that I had were inherent within the French language. Idiomatic language was especially problematic in the last story, *A Return to Jacmel*. Certain expressions, such as *ne pas être tombé de la dernière pluie*, have English equivalents in meaning, but wouldn’t have made sense in the context of the story. This particular expression, meaning more or less, “not to have been born yesterday”, was used to refer to a pair of scissors, but since scissors are never born, I couldn’t use the English equivalent. Instead, I opted to use a translation of the original expression. Another thing that was a bit problematic was a pun (Dr. Hervé Braget’s name was transformed to Dr. Hervé Braguette, a colloquial word meaning a man’s zipper) in the original French that I did not pick up on right away. Translating this pun was more of a basis of translating the idea behind it, and not so much the pun itself. I would
say that translating ideas versus words in general is what all good translations should be based on.

Related to this, I had a hard time deciding which of the few aspects of the text to keep in French, and which ones to translate into English. This was most apparent in *Hallelujah*. I decided to keep the song about the fish, Zin Thézin, and his lover, Lovéna in its original language, not because it was difficult to translate, but because it just didn’t sound as good in English as it would in French (I would rather read *mon poisson fou over my crazy fish* any day). More than at any other time when I would have a written project, the sounds of words, and how they appeared on the page, mattered as much as what those words were communicating.

I also believed that keeping certain things in French added to the story’s cultural landscape, even though I would consider *Alléluia* an example of Caribbean literature before I would consider it an example of French literature. However, I did at times feel trouble conveying a sense of its Caribbean-ness, as they were originally written in French and not Haitian Creole. Besides the obvious details, such as city names, I wanted to give my readers the impression that they were being transported to the island of Haiti, without making it into a caricature, and without adding anything that Depestre himself did not intend to include. I think this came through from two aspects shared by the stories set in Jacmel, and that are also commonplace in other examples of Caribbean literature: the
ever present and legend-forming use of voodoo and gossip. These two aspects made these stories unquestionably different from a story set in Paris or any other part of Metropolitan France.

One of the words that I decided to leave un-translated was *femme-jardin*, undeniably important not only to the title story but also to the collection as a whole, as it is a motif in several of the other stories. If I were to translate it literally, it would be, “a woman-garden”, a beautiful, but nonsensical, image in English. In my opinion, Depestre’s idea of what a *femme-jardin* is varies from story to story, but the grand idea of a magical quality is apparent in all of the female characters that appear in the stories that I’ve translated. In *Hallelujah*, we have Zaza, Jacmel’s “star” of “legendary” beauty. *Ambulance* has another “legend” of a different sort in Emily Brown, misplaced in the gray of Mink Slide’s ghetto. *Enchantment* features the dizzying curves of Ilona and Margareta, and *Retour*, while not having a female protagonist in the style of the other stories, has a man who openly declared his love for women in a very grand way. These women are so appealing for more reasons other than their physical beauty. For their male counterparts, and certainly for Depestre also, these women serve as muses, and, to revisit the allusion of the botanical, ones to cultivate in order to create powerful and supernatural life forces.

Making characters sound realistic in their speech is also a very important element of any translation. Throughout the process I had to
“embody” the characters, as a way for the reader to pick up on the way that Depestre intended for them to be portrayed. Crafting the dialogue was in general a difficult exercise because there is a great difference between how the characters speak to each other and how Depestre speaks to the reader, i.e., his descriptive paragraphs were much more imagistic and evocative than the dialogue. To do this, I often pretended to be the character in question. I remember very vividly, sitting in my room, imagining how I would speak if I were a prejudiced Southern American police officer. It was painful, but it worked. Other characters were easier. Even though I have no experience as a 1940’s Haitian farm hand, I knew that a peasant, like Hallelujah’s Laudrun, would not have a sophisticated syntax, so having his dialogue be too heavy-handed would have come off as unrealistic.

I chose these four stories because I felt that they conveyed Depestre’s skill as a writer. He was able to realistically portray a wide variety of characters in a wide variety of settings, from his hometown of Jacmel to a black neighborhood in the pre-Civil Rights era Deep South. Regarding the latter, I was impressed by how he was able to capture the feeling of the Civil Rights Era, even though, as a non-American, he did not directly experience any of it first hand. In this way, I would also be able to “test” my skills as a translator. The differences among the four of the stories all presented a distinct set of issues: I didn’t want to have Hallelujah’s strong sexual language to sound juvenile or crude, even
though the story is narrated by a teenager. *Ambulance* and *Enchantment* were both short and therefore needed to “pack a punch”, but they differed in that *Ambulance* has a crisp delivery (and is also based on true events), while *Enchantment* is, essentially, a poem in prose narrated by Depestre himself. *Return*, with its ending back dropped by the mérveilleux and mystical, ran the risk of sounding absurd or farcical.

As I looked back on the finished product, one issue that I considered was, how should this work be seen in comparison with Depestre’s others? When I first read it, I assumed that, because he is known as one of the most important writers of the Négritude movement, this collection of stories would reflect that quality. (i.e., it would clearly assert his blackness, as Négritude means literally, “negro-ness”). But after careful recollection, I realized that Depestre has made, within the stories that I’ve translated, an appeal to universalism and the celebration of life in general. His négritude leanings are in a sense still very apparent in his love for his country, and for the aforementioned celebration of its women manifested into the character of Zaza, but the other stories too show that this collection is in general about the joys of being alive; even the stories entrenched in tragedy have glimmers of hope in them, whether they’re found in the beauty of nature, love or music.

I consider a translation to be successful when it reads as if it were originally written in the target language. I hope that my attempt has done justice to the poetic expressiveness of Depestre’s original.
Hallelujah for a Femme-jardin

Alléluia pour une femme-jardin
And the cry that, the twisted mouth, this being, in vain, wants to sound,
is an immense hallelujah lost in the endless silence.

Georges Bataille
One Friday night, Aunt Zaza came to the house for dinner. She had been very upset because, that week, no one in the family was able to come with her to the farm. Her irritation was appropriate for the evening, because it changed dramatically our usually humble supper to an elegant banquet. It was unbelievable: The glasses were perfectly trimmed Baccarat\(^1\), the plates were Sèvres\(^2\), and the flatware was a gleaming silver. The tablecloth looked as if it had been embroidered in Aubusson\(^3\). The tap water tasted like champagne, and the bread was of the finest quality. The fish broth gave off the aromas of haute cuisine. The room’s light did not come from the lamp, but from Aunt Zaza’s gold-speckled green eyes, even though my attention fell only on her breasts.

“Why won’t Olivier come to the farm with me?” she asked.

“You know that Olivier has homework \(^\)”, said my mother.

“And besides, he’s very careless around water. He insists on going

\(^1\) Baccarat is a French manufacturer of fine crystal glassware. 
\(^2\) Sèvres is a manufacturer of porcelain ware, once chartered by the French royal family. 
\(^3\) Aubusson is a commune in central France, famous for its fine tapestries and carpets.
further into it than anyone else. That bay is filled with sharks. Something bad could happen.”

“You’re exaggerating, Agnès”, said my father. “Olivier knows how to behave himself. Nothing bad could happen to him if he’s with Zaza.”

“Fine”, mom replied in an annoyed tone. “If he gets into an accident it will be your fault.”

“The mountain air will be good for him,” said my aunt. He’s always cooped up with his books. Olivier, You won’t swim too far from the shore, right mon chéri?”

I couldn’t muster up my voice, so I nodded my head yes.

“And even better,” continued Isabelle, “is that you can come spend the night at my house. Then we can be on horseback before dawn.”

“That’s a good idea”, said my mother, while my father concealed his pride, and perhaps his envy at seeing me leave alone with the beauty of the family.

She was barely thirteen years old when the people of Jacmel began to talk about her beauty. Three years later, they went to Port-Au-Prince to crown her Carnaval Queen. During the parade, men and women broke out into a frenzy of admiration at her beauty. Everything about Isabelle Ramonet offered a spectacle for the eyes and said to everyone: “Look at me well, because it’s only about once a century that a
woman so beautiful appears whose own flesh proclaims that she is a
dazzling example of the species.”

As Isabelle’s float went by, the crowd’s frenzy took on
mystical qualities: a young man, after exchanging a smile with the
queen, climbed a coconut tree in one breath while howling the cries of a
wounded animal. An elderly farmer choked out, “I will give you my hand
if you blow me a kiss!” As soon as she heard this, Isabelle blew a kiss in
the stranger's direction. Keeping his promise, the farmer took out a
machete and cut off his left hand at the wrist with a blow of violence
never seen before. Then, he threw the severed hand at Aunt Isa’s feet,
splattering blood on the hem of her royal gown. Someone managed to
drag the crazy man away, and the commotion of the crowd continued
with even greater fervor.

After the carnival was over, hundreds of suitors asked for
the young girl in marriage. She turned them down with grace and
returned to her home in Jacmel. An arc de triomphe awaited her at the
entrance to the little southwestern Haitian town. “This return resembles
the apotheosis of a princess in The Arabian Nights, announced a local
newspaper the next day. A year later, Zaza married the son of a coffee
exporter, but he died a short time later in a motorcycle accident.

The rumor was that Daniel Locroy died as a result of a
mysterious illness that he picked up from his wife: the more he made
love to her, the more he saw that his genitals became smaller like a strip
of leather. When, one morning he woke up to discover that his penis had completely disappeared and that he had only half testicle, he shot himself in the head. A doctor put an end to the crazy talk: he saw the mangled body of Locroy among the motorcycle debris at the foot of a tree on the road to Meyer.

New admirers appeared beneath the young widow’s windows. She firmly told to all those panting suitors that she had no intention of getting married again. By evading the festivals thrown in her honor, the horse rides, poems and love letters addressed to her, wanga⁴ curses, and mean spirited schemes, she became the village’s mythic symbol. Her presence became perfectly intertwined with the old trees of the Place d’Armes, the waters of the bay and rusty hull of the Albano, and the Gosseline River.

Only her close friends and family missed her when Isabelle Ramonet left Jacmel for a stay of several months in Europe. It would have been the same when she came back, if an article in Le Nouvelliste hadn’t revealed, “the still stunning Isabelle Ramonet, unforgettable Carnaval Queen of 1937, invited to Europe by a director to star in a film, kindly declined his offer. She preferred to return to her southwestern hometown. One night when her boredom will be more oppressive than she can bear, she will bitterly regret having turned down such a chance.

We do not hesitate to write that without a doubt Isabelle has lost the

⁴ Wanga is a Haitian Creole word of Bantu origin, meaning a voodoo charm or spell.
unique opportunity to confer the celebrity of a new Greta Garbo on her little town. We hope that perhaps, it isn’t too late for her to go back on her unbelievable decision. Such is the wish that thousands of her admirers voice for the future of her beauty.”

Aunt Zaza took a scornful view of this gossip. She didn’t pay any attention to the slander that accompanied her return. She built the first cinema in Jacmel using the money that she had inherited at her husband’s passing, indifferent to the flattery and mockeries. I saw *Fanfan la Tulipe, Mathias Sandorf*[^5], some Charlie Chaplin films, and many other silent films on its screen.

The people of Jacmel used to say that she had invested in the cinema in memory of her lover in Paris, a famous actor who finally dumped her for a Scandinavian movie star. They added that this actor was very lucky, because if he had kept up his love affair, he too would have perished in an accident on some motorway in Europe. Such a beauty could only cause misfortune. They also claimed that the money used to build the cinema came from witchcraft, from the graves that Isabelle’s mother, the widow of General César Ramonet, had dug up in her garden. She had brought to light, in an atmosphere of scandal, numerous pots filled with gold pieces and delicate china.

[^5]: *Fanfan La Tulipe* is a French comedy film released in 1952. *Mathias Sandorf*, originally an adventure series written by Jules Verne, was adapted for the screen in 1921 and 1963.
Frequent trips to the countryside gave Aunt Zaza a break from Jacmel’s gossip. She owned a farm on a plateau overlooking the sea, in the village of Montagne-Envoûtée. She spent most of her weekends there. She never went alone in order to avoid the accusation that lovers had been dug up from the same ditch that the movie theater came from. She was always chaperoned by a friend or by her mother.

In our family, the lore of Zaza didn’t come only from her physical appeal. We always praised her délicatesse, her kindness, her simple nature, and her generosity towards the less fortunate. She was always ready to lend a hand, to help out her people, without ever asking for anything in return. We never witnessed the mood swings, whims, and fits of pride that so often blemish the beauty of women. She wasn’t a holy terror, but “a sword with an infinitely tender heart”, as one of my father’s friends once said.

For me, her favorite nephew, it was as if Aunt Zaza were an actress on the screen that captivated the nights of my adolescence. She bestowed beautiful images. She would often come sit next me in the little room, and her presence broadened the horizons of the films I would be watching. For a long time I was convinced that the projection lights that created the stories that made me dream came from her flesh. But when I turned 15, I started to admire her for what she was in real life.

Sitting next to her in the dark, I was beginning to ignore the stories on the screen, to turn all of my attention towards a cinema that
overwhelmed my entire being. Isa would innocently run her fingers through my hair, then stroke the back of my neck and my naked legs, without realizing that her affection was putting me on edge from head to toe. I picked up on her feminine presence in the same way some animals can sense an approaching storm or earthquake.

II

That night, I slept in a folding bed, in a room next to my aunt’s. “We have to go to bed early”, she said to me while placing an innocent kiss on my forehead. I had a hard time falling asleep. The foreboding that grew inside me was so intense that I thought my veins were going to burst.

It was still dark when we left the city. I was the young king who, in the company of a foreign princess, his cousin, was traveling over the happy sleepiness of his kingdom. We traveled for nearly two hours, our horses maintaining the same pace. Zaza was impressive on horseback. She was smiling, her hair in the wind, perched as if she were about to fly. I was jealous of her horse, an auburn purebred that seemed to know that the star of the city was riding on his back. When we got to the mountain, we gave the horses to a peasant who took care of the farm.

“I didn’t think that I was going to see you this early”, said Laudrun.
“We came as soon as we could”, explained my aunt apologetically.

“Olivier is already a good horseman”, said Laudrun affectionately.

“You have to be careful once we get to the beach, Olivier. Should we leave right away?” she suggested cheerfully.

A few minutes later, we took the goat trail that, after several winding fields of corn and sweet potato, led up to a very steep cluster of sharp-edged rock. As we were walking, the mountain’s vibration would set off the cries of sleeping lizards. Down an about 200-meter tumble of jagged rock, the path led unexpectedly to a white sand beach. On our way down, Isabelle was leaning on my shoulder so that she wouldn’t lose balance. I didn’t dare to look at her in her swimsuit. On the beach, she beat me running to the water. In my head, images sprang adrift, swirling images that tore away at each other like the leaves of a banana tree during a hurricane. I was born for the life-rhythm of the woman who was running in front of me. Her curves spun out in an incandescent harmony of glands, fibers, tissues, nerves, muscles and curves relentlessly lyrical. I began to run behind her. When I reached the first waves, she was already eagerly swimming with her arms outstretched. I threw myself into her wake. When I reached a meter from her feet, she sharply turned over and playfully screamed: “A shark! Olivier, a shark is coming for us!” We began to swim wildly towards the shore. A wave carried us toward the beach. We stretched out, completely out of breath. We looked at each other, laughing, unable to say a word.
“The water is marvelous, don’t you think?”

“It’s great!” I said.

“Are you happy that you came?”

“Very happy, Aunt Isa.”

“It’s crazy how much you’ve grown.”

“…”

“You’re already taller than I am.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You are, mon chéri. How much do you want to bet?”

We jumped up to compare our heights. She was barely taller than me. She was 32 at the time. I was about half her age.

“Time passes quickly, doesn’t it Olivier?”

“…”

“I remember the day you were born as if it were last Thursday. You came out feet first, with a skin growth on your head. You weren’t even five minutes old, and already you were laughing. I was the first one to hold you, and the first one to see that you had eyes that were just as green as mine. You didn’t stop laughing and shaking your hands and feet, as if you were trying to greet the world that you just came into. I asked Agnès to name you Olivier.”

“Why Olivier?”

“Because long ago the olive tree was a symbol of wisdom and glory.”
“I’m not wise or glorious.”

“You are very wise for your age and you will be glorious.”

“And Isabelle, what does that mean?

“It’s a café au lait color, like my complexion. We can say an “isabelle” dress, or an “isabelle” horse.”

“It’s also the name of a very famous queen.”

“There’s a very charming story about her. A long time ago there was an Austrian archduchess. Her husband was laying siege to a Belgian city. She made a vow to change her blouse only after the city had fallen. The siege lasted three years. Later, they gave the princess’s name to the color of the blouse when she had lost all hope.”

The sunshine was fantastic. We could make out the small boats of fishermen in the distance. The sky and the sea were playing madly at being the sky and sea. Fits of laughter interrupted the stories that we were telling each other. Again and again we threw ourselves into the waves. Around 11 o’clock, we headed back to the farm. We arrived covered in sweat, our lips salty, our eyes burning. We took the path that led to a freshwater spring. Our fatigue gave Isa’s walk a sluggishness that took my breath away.

The small of her back was beautifully arched, her buttocks round and full, her thighs and legs were like an unblemished long slabs of metal. The cool water from the spring calmed my ardor. We arrived at the house.
The house was a thatched-roof bungalow where a thirst-quenching semi-shade prevailed. It had two rooms surrounded by a spacious veranda. The first room was a living room and the other, a bedroom. The bed was incredibly high and from a bygone era. I saw Isa take off her bathing suit without her noticing that I was there. My body began to tremble. My teeth were chattering. I was convulsing in my chest and I could barely breathe. I left the room as quickly as I could. She joined me a few moments later, wearing a pair of white shorts and a flowery blouse. She was glowing.

I went into the room again to change. I couldn’t find a folding bed, only the bed fit for a couple in the middle of the room. I was going to sleep then in the bed of the archduchess of Austria. Maybe there was a double mattress? No, there was only one. I climbed onto the bed and dropped myself into it gently. I had to bite the pillow to control the flow of blood that was boiling in my groin.

I joined Zaza under the arbor where she was preparing lunch. A pleasant odor of salted cod stewed in olive oil was coming from the wood coal stove. My aunt took the seeds out of the goat-peppers, and threw them into the frying pan with a loud sizzle.

“You must be hungry, mon chéri. Lunch will be ready soon. I’ve cooked a codfish and pepper stir-fry, fried ripe bananas, slices of avocado and eggplant. We’ll have homemade punch to drink. Laudrun promised to bring us fruits for dessert.
We were sitting at the table, appetites at the ready, when Laudrun came with a basket full of oranges, grapefruits, cashew apples, cirouelles and bunches of guinep.

“Oh, you’re spoiling us!” said Isa.

“I don’t know what’s happening to the papaya trees this year,” said Laudrun, “but they aren’t growing well. I know how much you love papayas.”

“Thank you very much, Laudrun. I have a little present for you as well.”

My aunt left the room and came back with a red scarf in her hand.

“Thank you so much, commère! I needed a red scarf to wrap General Brise-Fer⁶ in for next Sunday’s cockfight. You’ve read my mind.”

“Is General Brise-Fer still tough?”

“Yes, he’s a very brave boy!”

“A rooster warrior”, said my aunt, laughing.

We raised our glasses to General Brise-Fer’s future victories.

We spent the rest of the day touring the farm with Laudrun. We would often stop to hear the life stories of the plants and animals Laudrun was taking care of. The sharecropper also told us about being a victim of the landowner’s continual abuses, like the rest of the peasants in the region.

⁶ Literally, “Iron breaker”, used to indicate an accident-prone person (or animal).
We went back to the beach at the end of the afternoon. The water was still lukewarm. We did a few breaststrokes and reached the plateau. The spring became cooler as the sun went down. It was already evening. A Saturday night in Haiti crackling with barbecues in the hills and the harmonies of tam-tams flying out form everywhere, clicking calls in the trees from birds going to sleep. We turned on a hurricane lamp. We ate a few simple fruits for dinner. Afterwards, we lay down in the lounge chairs in the veranda. My aunt asked me about my studies. I told her that after my Baccalaureate I might study medicine. She admitted to me that one of her life’s regrets was not being able to go to university. She told me about her stay in Europe. There she discovered a world completely different from ours. The people lived in the 20th century. When you came from Haiti, it was natural to be amazed and open-mouthed when it came to Paris or London. But the lights of those big cities weren’t as innocent as they seemed to be. Laudrun’s arrival interrupted our conversation.

Laudrun was a small, sturdy man, full of panache and surprise in his talk. He had very stern features, but his laughing eyes made fun of the rest of his face, especially when he began to “spin out” a story. Barely standing on the veranda, he announced,

“Cric....”

“Crac7,” my aunt and I responded in unison.

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7 In Haitian tradition, a storyteller will call out, “Cric” to ask his/her audience if they are willing to listen to a story. The audience will answer, “Crac”, to show that they are ready to listen.
“Once upon a time,” said Laudrun, “a young woman fell in love with a river fish. She loved him so much that she spent her life at the edge of the water where he lived. Her favorite pastime was, naturally, doing the washing. When she didn’t have any clothes to wash, she stayed sitting at the riverbank as if she were ceaselessly bleaching out the precious fabric of her passion. Every once in a while Zin Thézin stuck his dazzling fins out of the water to exchange signals with his Lovéna.

“But the couple didn’t only live on fresh water and tenderness. Often Lovéna would take off her clothes and plunge into the water to meet her mâle-nègre. Zin Thézin would plunge his hard sex into Lovéna’s black skin.”

“One day, the young girl’s father, very worried about her long absences, hid in the bushes near the river, and quickly discovered the truth. He kept from talking about it with his daughter. He arranged to send her to the market as often as possible, several miles away, in order to keep her far from the farm.

“One morning, once Lovéna was gone, he headed for the river. He had learned by heart the secret words that Lovéna used to let her prince know that he could safely appear. The father began to imitate Lovéna’s voice. He felt a strong hatred towards the impudent fish and was delighting in a plan to get rid of him. Suddenly, Zin, filled with desire, jumped out more than a meter above the current. Several days had
passed since he disappeared into his mistress’s flesh. Lovéna’s father bludgeoned him on the head, and Zin sank straight to the bottom.

“Zin had told Lovéna one day that if he were in any trouble, wherever she would be, she would know by drops of blood at the top of her left breast. At the moment when Zin Thézin fell from the blow and sank to the bottom of the river, Lovéna, just then at the market, discovered that her left breast was bleeding profusely. She rushed towards the river like a madwoman. When she arrived, there still remained a large scarlet stain where Zin had fallen. She didn’t cry out. She walked towards her house, and found her father on the doorstep.

‘Father, did you kill my fiancé?’

‘Don’t you have any shame, you damned whore, for giving your body to an animal?’

‘Father,” she interrupted in a fit, I didn’t come to discuss with you what is considered good or bad in this world. I want you to respond with a yes or a no. Was it you who killed Zin Thézin?’

‘Yes’, said the father, ‘With a single blow to the head, I sent that lowlife fish of yours to take his place at the bottom of the...’

“He didn’t have the time to finish his sentence. Lovéna gave him a horrible blow to the throat with a machete. She threw the murder weapon to the ground and ran back to the river. There she sat down on the sunlit grass of the riverbank and began to sing:

Zin Thézin mon poisson fou, Zin
Lovéna’s family, huddled in the thicket, solemnly looked over what they saw. The young girl’s voice was so melodiously hopeless that no one could say a word or make a gesture. They were all there: the mother, brothers, uncles, aunts, and the grandmother, stunned, less alive than

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8 Zin Thézin, my crazy fish/Zin Thézin, my crazy fish/Captain of the water/My crazy fish, Zin/Prince of my thighs/My crazy fish, Zin/King of my pain/My crazy fish, Zin/My only season/My crazy fish, Zin/Law of my blood/My crazy fish, Zin/My poor love/My crazy fish, Zin/Zin Thézin, my crazy fish/Zin Thézin, my crazy fish
the bushes that they were concealed in. Lovéna sang madly about the tragedy of her fish, her eyes fixed on the river reflecting an indifferent sky. Then she let herself slide gently into the current, without stopping her farewell lament. She had disappeared but her voice could still be heard above the water. Some people have the gift of hearing it on certain nights. They are the ones who believe, for better or for worse, that a thread of harmony exists, that will forever unify the rocks, trees, fishes and man.”

Laudrun “spun out” other old Haitian lore. But it was the story of Zin and Lovéna that moved us the most. When we had had enough, Aunt Isabelle said to Laudrun,

“It’s very late. It’s time to go to bed. Thank you so much, Laudrun, for your beautiful stories.”

“Good night my friends”, he replied.

“Good night, compère.”

III

Isa got to the room before me. She was already in her nightgown when I got there. I took off my clothes as if I were taking off a suit of 14th-century armor. When my aunt walked past the lamp to get into bed, her silhouette, clearly visible, literally took my breath away. I stayed a little
while in the corner of the room in my pajamas, not knowing what to expect.

“Open the window, turn off the light, and come to bed,” she said. I did as I was told. The sheets were cool and smelled good. I was hot and couldn’t breathe.

“Good night, mon chéri.”

“Good night, Aunt Isa.”

She immediately fell asleep. I couldn’t. I slowly grew accustomed to the room’s darkness. The distinct lines of every object were plain to see. The shuddering trees and the stars in a corner of the sky were visible through the window. What a shame that I wasn’t a star, a tree, a fish or whatever else, and not this animal that I was, numbed with fear, lying behind my princess. Little by little I felt her presence pass into my body. Her blood went rushing and began to circulate in my veins, as if I were undergoing some kind of transfusion. I fell asleep under her influence. I was woken up by cool, late-night air that blew from the sea. I moved to the other side of the bed to get warmer.

“Are you cold too?” said Zaza.

“I’ll close the window,” I responded.

“No, we’ll lose the fresh air. Come closer to me.”

I was in her arms.

I was lost in her arms.

I was alive anew in Zaza’s awakening arms.
“We’re warmer now, aren’t we?” she said.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think of her tight embrace or my erection or anything else, other than that I was, unbelievably, lying on top of Zaza!

“Have you forgotten that I’m your aunt?”

“…”

“Have you ever had sex?”

“Yes.”

“With?”

“Nadia.”


“Last year, during vacation at Meyer⁹.”

“How often?”

“Every day, all summer.” (I wasn’t exaggerating.)

“And here I was thinking that my niece was a virgin and that you were just a little boy. When did you start wanting me?”

“At the beach this morning. At the house last night. In fact, since forever; probably since the crib, after the name that you gave me.”

An overjoyed look of confidence appeared on my face. I was lying down on top of Zaza, life against life. Our hands were clenched together so hard that they were crushed, as if they weren’t even ours.

“Tought you were such a good boy.”

“…”

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⁹ City in Southeast Haiti.
“You are my grand poisson fou!”

“And your father wants to kill me with a single blow to the head!”

“You know this isn’t a fairy tale, right?”

“I know.”

“Oh! Look at how strong you are! You are...no...wait let me take off your shirt...oh yes... My whole body is saying yes...”

I kissed her with all the hunger of my sixteen years. At first, her tongue and teeth grew tense with my kisses. So, with my mouth half open, I kissed her gently and hotly, on her eyes, ears, the nape of her neck, her temple, and in the curve of her arm. I nibbled her fingertips and kissed her again on the mouth. All the while my hands, spread like a tame crab, caressed her belly and thighs.

I realized how marvelous her body was the more I caressed it. She, too, began to delicately graze my shoulders, my torso and my stomach, my entire body, even my sex, with half-open lips. In turn, I stroked her feet, calves, knees, thighs, and the beautiful mound above her sex. Then I lingered over her full, shapely buttocks, round and firm, that turned like a double-focus lighthouse to the rhythm of my caresses. As I touched each of her breasts, a miniature world was revealed to me that reflected Zaza’s fabled universe. And my tongue pointed like the second-hand of a clock, marked the luminous seconds about her vagina. Her sex boasted a supple and vibrant clitoris, and well-formed vulva, palatable, inviting,

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10 Reference to the story of Zin Thézin and Lovéna
and swollen with emotions. I was grafted onto its ripe richness that opened up to my taste like some unusual fruit, with the feel of raw silk, her intense, feverish look, her smooth teeth, the outline of her beautiful, full lips, her high cheekbones. It was a second face that proclaimed, beat a rhythm, expressed in a final utter of ecstasy, the taste, beauty, joy and indestructible grace of the species. Having satisfied our appetites, I returned to her mouth that consented to mine, and our sexes ravenously joined together as one, finally catching fire, racing with each other, guiding each other, kneading each other, and joyously living an orgasm that repeated over and over through the night, blindly throwing us into the dizzying, steep confines of our bodies!

When roosters on nearby trees marked dawn’s arrival, we impulsively ran towards the beach, completely naked. We got to the base of the cliff, our blood again boiling. We rolled in the cool sand until the first waves arrived, and there, in the tide, one more time, to close off the night with an odd number, we asked life to bestow its salt, plankton, surf, millstones, and its most secret tools. Our marine lovemaking gave us a diverse and nameless rhythm. Before the legend of Adam and the crucifixion of Christ, it turned Zaza and me into a cosmic breath that burst of its tired weight in the cool breeze of the early morning.

We returned to the farm as if we were champions. Our fatigue burst into laughter. We were happy with all that we had done, happy to be alive, God damn it!, on this Sunday that was tenderly opening its
beautiful Haitian arms to us. We slept until noon and woke up ravenous. In no time, we were sitting in front of the lunch that Laudrun had kindly prepared for us: grilled chicken with peppers, steamed sweet plantain, fishcakes, roasted sweet potatoes, eggplant and tomato salad, red beans and rice simmered in coconut milk and garnished with salt beef, watermelon and pineapple slices, and to drink, a mountain punch worthy of our recent orgies.

The table was set on the veranda. A warm breeze was coming from the bay, but it was Zaza’s white skirt that cooled the afternoon down. We ate in silence, caught up in a mute enthrallment. Each time I lifted my head from my plate, I found the night’s wonders in my love’s eyes, iridescent and sprinkled with spots of gold. After the meal, I helped Zaza wash the dishes. Then we went for an after-lunch walk.

The sea wove kilometers of lace in front of us and from time to time, the mischief of an upsurge produced a flower of foam. Zaza led the way. As I watched her rippling sensually in front of me, I was gripped by a homicidal rage towards all who have dishonored the female body. Where were the prophets buried, who foamed with premature ejaculation, who invented the idea that feminine charms are misleading and wrong? I would set off dynamite in the tombs of these vindictive and wicked accusers’ tombs, who, throughout the ages, have wanted to separate the rhythm of the female body from that of the seasons, trees, wind, rain and sea. Watching Zaza walk, her sensual curves rolling
beneath the sun, her flesh with its fullness of fruit, her backside that had the abundance of the good earth ready for plowing, I thought of the disdain and aversion that the religions of salvation have provoked concerning a woman’s sexual organs.

Don’t we have, in most languages, recourse to the filthiest of descriptions for the female genitalia? The same vulgar terms are used to malign and revile the vagina: cunt, coco, pussy, bohio, porra, coño, twat, etc. We hear: “so and so is a dirty cunt”, “por el coño de su madre, kolanguette man-man’ou, lambi bounda mammam’ou!” etc.

While Zaza was walking through the afternoon, I slashed away from my life the funereal, offensive myths that humiliated and darkened woman, by presenting her genitals as the most shameful point of human relations.

We had arrived at the edge of the cliff, at an area that rose up to a coconut plantation. We were overlooking the entire stretch of Jacmel bay.

We were sitting against each other, side by side. The afternoon was flawless: as smooth as the sky or the sea, or what Zaza’s life was to me. The small boats of the fishermen appeared immobile in the distance. Flocks of birds were flying in a perfect order, the only movement between the sky and water.

The sea gradually receded, pulling back the little boats, the sand, the cliff edges, the sky, the coconut trees and us into its immense darkness. A star appeared, followed by thousands of others. We headed
towards the bungalow. We dined hastily on goat’s milk and a fruit salad. Then we threw ourselves on the bed without turning off the lamp. I told Isa, as naked as the light, what I was thinking about when she was walking in front of me on the path. With cavalier ease, she spread her legs open so that I could celebrate the glory of her sex with the fresh words of my sixteen years.

    Hallelujah for you, life’s most important rhythm!
    Hallelujah for the patience of joyful hormones in the mystery of woman. I salute you and present you for the worship of the world. For the love of you, I am ready to cross over deserts and unexplored forests, stand up to being burned at the stake, to withstand electric chairs, gas and torture chambers. I erect your revolt on the earth’s street corners, to convert those who see in you a geometry of darkness to your radiance. You are neither a star nor a mystical fruit that shines upon our destiny. You are neither monstrance nor sewer, source of sadness and perdition. I am neither prophet, nor slave, nor some macho man, but simply a man captivated, proclaiming that after experiencing you, your rhythm that dictates the wind’s rising, the sun following the night, moon, and stars, and the rain and snow’s promise to cultivate the earth into sweet harvests!

    Because of you life’s unity and solidarity hold firm, despite the immense mental intrigue that the living trudges through.
Our affair lasted two beautiful years. We arranged to see each other every weekend, in the mountains. My studies, far from suffering, on the contrary found wings of inspiration that reassured my parents. The days when my grandmother accompanied us, I slept on the veranda, in a folding bed. Grandmother, who had recently suffered an accident, was partially paralyzed in her leg, and couldn’t venture through the path that led jerkily to the beach. So, Zaza and I, when we weren’t making love in the water, made love in the boulder crevices. Our long absences disturbed César (grandmother Cécilia used this man’s name since the death of Isabelle’s father, General César Ramonet, my grandfather, who was shot during a revolt in the hills of Jacmel). César used to give us suspicious looks when we were arriving from the beach, our eyes sparkling, our gestures unsure, silent and transformed like certain trees after a storm. But her suspicion never went far beyond mutterings beneath her infamously sarcastic breath. We took it for granted though, and in her presence, we avoided all looks, words or gestures that could have given us away. I was the well-behaved nephew who spent time with the jewel of all aunts.

In the long run, we didn’t hold back on our weekly meetings in the mountains. I would pop in and visit her often after I left school in the late
afternoon before going home. She lived in the lower city in a mansion lost in greenery. Before arriving, the last two hundred meters descended down a narrow pathway, in the form of a staircase, which was one of the charms of old Jacmel. Since then, every time I’m in a foreign city and I descend the steps of a similar street, even in bright daylight, I’m always overwhelmed by the cool dusk where Zaza, marvelously naked, was waiting for me. We would succumb to the same skies. We called our rendezvous my second philosophy class, and at this school on the edge of evening, we didn’t know who was the student and who was the teacher, while we challenged each other in imagination and fantasy.

One windy October night, as I was leaning over a Greek text, a rumor came barreling through my parent’s house: the Parisiana theater was in flames. All of Jacmel rushed towards the disaster. When I got there, the theater was burning intensely in the bay’s wind. I didn’t see Isa. Where had she gone? Had she stayed at home? Her name went flying from mouth to mouth through the crowd. The village idiot finally announced that he had seen her, a few minutes before, entering the cinema through the side emergency exit, when she said she had heard a cry in the auditorium. Once the fire was under control, an unrecognizable, carbonized body was pulled out of the furnace that a bracelet identified as what was left of Zaza Ramonet.
The entire city carried her body to the ceremony the next afternoon. During the grand procession, the twisted lips of those who had loved her used words like, queen, heroine, and marvel to describe her. I also saw the distraught eyes of those who had lusted after her in vain, slandered her name and taunted her, and who at this moment of her nothingness did not know how to have themselves pardoned by the pyre of bones burned to ashes that she now was, under a mountain of roses.

The religious ceremony came after: old Père Naélo, surrounded by deacons, candles, and the other displays of lavish funerals, gave a brief sermon. It was too much for my ears to believe. He revealed that Isabelle Ramonet had been the most generous benefactress of the parish, and that her soul was so beautiful that Saint Philippe and Saint Jacques, the two patrons of Jacmel, were not the same after seeing and hearing her in their church. He said that her horrible ending was nothing more than the disguise in which God had decided to have her leave this world, and that in her new kingdom she had already returned to her splendor, that continued more and more to refresh, like a flowing stream of the morning, the swollen hands and feet of the Redeemer!

When the group resumed the march for the last crossing of Jacmel, I saw the ridiculous commotion of several men trying to help carry a coffin lighter than an empty nest. Suddenly, the earth swallowed it and its flowers in one gulp.
Evening’s untimely return spread over the living and the dead. It was the city’s first night without stars. At dinner time, in the houses, Zaza was all that was talked about: her life, beauty, goodness, finesse, the wind and flames, the ashes that she had become, to die with her theater.

In the glass cage where I was trapped with my woe, I couldn’t stop my “femme-jardin” from being, for the thousands of heads leaned over their dinner plates, a mere memory fit to become a legend, a myth or a star-studded tale of cries of astonishment.
An Ambulance for Nashville

Une ambulance pour Nashville
Enlisting in the Navy at 17, Stefan Ransom fought, sometimes at sea, sometimes in the Pacific Islands, until the last day of the war. His conduct during combat, especially on Okinawa, made him worthy of receiving (from the very hands of General MacArthur), his country’s highest decorations. A bright future as a sailor seemed to smile on him. Besides, he loved the sea. In a letter to his fiancée Emily Brown, he had compared life at sea to the stormy days that his race had lived in the lands of the Americas. The sea also could illustrate the best sides of life: one night when his cruiser was approaching the island of Guam, while watching the sensual movement of the waves, he had thought of what would happen between him and Emily on the night of his return.

The month of May in 1946 was a river of pearls around the neck of Columbia, a small city in Tennessee. It was the first spring after the war. In these days of grace, even the black ghetto of Mink Slide\textsuperscript{11} had lost its incurable wounds of history. From morning to night, deep in the groves, on the telegraph wires, in the words of reunited lovers, the birds of Tennessee reinvented the lyricism of times of peace. The sun, dew, blades of grass, butterflies, and human eyes like those of the most humble animals, added new harmonies to the radiance of the season.

“Oh, Emily Brown, hallelujah for your magnificent behind!”

\textsuperscript{11} This story is based on true events. In Mink Slide, the black district of Columbia, TN, riots broke out after an altercation between a black military veteran and a white shopkeeper. More than 100 people were arrested.
Old Ted Sam, at the doorway of the shoemaker’s shop, had hurled out this cry of admiration as Emily Brown went by. That morning the young woman hadn’t been ashamed of this daring allusion to her derriere. Wasn’t her whole being in celebration of the world? At 19 years old, she was a misplaced legend in the midst of Mink Slide’s suffering. In New York or Los Angeles, her bodily abundance would have, without a doubt, been a perpetual subject of wonder. But in the gray monotony of Mink Slide, Emily was a miracle of female light. Even Edgar Hughes, pastor of the Baptist church, had not been able to look at her go by without believing that if heaven really existed, its front door would look like the archway that crowned the feline thighs of Emily Brown!

In the mean-time, from Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima, Emily obediently awaited Stefan Ransom’s return. Her heart had been a small migratory bird that, from wave to wave, from bush to bush, had followed the battles that Stefan took part in on the fronts of the Pacific. She was sure that the melody of her breasts, in the young man’s memory, would protect him from Japanese bullets and shells. The war, in effect, kept him safe and sane for her.

Now the young couple were walking through Columbia’s downtown. They had spent the previous days making love. Their embrace had the force and the unity of a jazz band: at each coitus, the trumpet of pleasure, commencing in a duet, led to a throbbing solo, before splashing them right into the marvelously tranquil bay of the blues of their
childhood. They stubbornly and wildly danced their joy of being alive. To continue to do that, they were going to get the radio that Emily put in for repair a week earlier at George Stevens and Co.

“Is it working all right now?” Emily asked the white clerk, who was beginning to pack up the radio.

“Yeah, we fixed it”, the clerk answered dryly.

“I don’t doubt it, I’d just like to be sure,” said Emily.

“Let her fiddle with her piece of junk,” Stevens, the owner, interjected.

Stefan plugged in the radio. The dial lit up. He began to move the needle around. Static spurted out. The addition of a ground wire and an antenna didn’t change anything.

“It’s not any better than it was before,” said Emily.

“But it worked fine before it saw you,” said the clerk.

“Radios, too, added Stevens, “sometimes get fed up with negros!”

Stefan suddenly felt himself projected into the daybreak of a Solomon Islands’ morning, when an enemy soldier had almost sliced his head with a swing of a saber. He wanted to retaliate like the way he would during battle. He held onto his rage and crushed it like a pepper between his teeth. Emily was at his side. He wedged the radio under his arm, and took Emily around the shoulders with his free hand.

“Let’s go sweetie,” Stefan said.

She didn’t move, her eyes haughtily fixed on Stevens.
“Is Your Royal Highness waiting to be hand-lifted the hell out of here?” said Stevens.

“Damned nigger, we’re talking to you,” added the clerk.

Stefan immediately put Stevens away in a flurry of fists. The clerk took the opportunity to give Emily a forceful slap. Stefan turned towards the clerk and, with a hook, brought him to the shop’s front window. The glass shattered onto the legs of the passersby.

“Kill those dirty niggers, kill them!” shouted Stevens and the clerk, going out to the street.

In an instant the sidewalk bristled with furious whites. Insults and threats were exploding from everywhere.

“Since we told them that they won the war, they walk our streets like they own the place!”

“Kill the sons of bitches!”

Emily and Stefan were cornered in the shop as the crowd was growing larger, angrier and was foaming at the mouth against them. Policemen finally showed up. Stefan showed them his veterans ID. They helped him and Emily break away from the volcano. The couple quickly took a taxi back to Mink Slide. After the truce of the first days of May, the horror and suffering of America had taken hold of them. They made plans into the night. After an hour, they decided: the next day they would take the first train to New York. Never mind that they didn’t have any
money. They were young and good-looking, they knew how to sing and
dance, and they would cross over this white man’s desert!

Emily was the first to hear the gunshots.

“Stefan, wake up, there’s shooting outside!”

Others shots fired, still far away.

“They’re shooting a Springfield,” Stefan pointed out.

At the same moment someone knocked on the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Randolph!”

Stefan went to open the door. Two other young people were with
his friend.

“What’s going on?” asked Emily.

“Here’s the story”, said Randolph. “The whites have spread the
rumor that black vets had decided to march through Columbia to get
some revenge for your fight this afternoon. They’re saying that we’re well
armed. The mayor called on the state authorities, and Governor MacNolly
has promised to send backup. Three National Guard companies have
already left for Nashville. The highway police are working with the Ku
Klux Klan. We’re going to help you get the hell away from here.”

“Let’s go now,” said Emily.

“Us leaving won’t calm these animals,” said Stefan. When they
don’t find us, their thirst for blood will make do with any innocent people
in their way. For us blacks the war isn’t over. Let’s fight!”
Stefan pulled open a drawer and took out a colt 45.

“\textquotesingle\textquotesingle I have three hunting rifles, too\textquotesingle\textquotesingle, he said. \textquotesingle\textquotesingle Alright, guys, are we fighting?\textquotesingle\textquotesingle

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead\textquotesingle\textquotesingle, said Emily. \textquotesingle\textquotesingle We have to give the news to these white maniacs. We\textquotesingle re fighting\textquotesingle\textquotesingle

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle That\textquotesingle s all we can do, right guys?\textquotesingle\textquotesingle

They were all in agreement.

The assailants in the Klan led the Lincoln Street attack with military precision. Stefan\textquotesingle s hunting rifles and pistol were quickly forced into silence. The young people, taken prisoner, found themselves tied-up in a prison cell in Columbia. At dawn, they came for Stefan. A half-hour later, they brought him back, unrecognizable. His eyes, nose, lips and chin formed a single, bloodied, black and blue swollen ball of flesh.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle It\textquotesingle s your turn, doll face,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle said the plainclothes officer to Emily.

They also kept her for half an hour. When she returned, she was anything but that vision of a springtime hallelujah. The three other young people had also been savagely beaten.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Now that each of you got what you deserve\textquotesingle\textquotesingle, said the sheriff, \textquotesingle\textquotesingle leave town before the sun comes up. That\textquotesingle s the Klan\textquotesingle s condition to let you live\textquotesingle\textquotesingle.

Randolph, John and Jimmy helped Emily and Stefan get to the exit. After they stumbled for a few yards, Emily fainted. The hospital in Columbia refused to admit them, but a black ambulance driver agreed to
take them to Nashville. In a great speed on bare tire rims, the ambulance started off on the highway to Nashville. Emily and Stefan were sprawled out on two adjacent stretchers. But, Stefan appeared to be in a more pitiful shape than his fiancée. The driver drove into the cool moments before dawn at breakneck speed. In Nashville, he stopped the ambulance at three hospitals without being able to get the wounded admitted. A fourth, after laborious negotiations, finally accepted them. It was too late. To separate the lifeless bodies of Emily and Stefan, they had to cut their joined hands at the wrist.
The Enchantment of an Hour of Rain

L’enchantement d’une heure de pluie
Since her arrival in Rio de Janeiro, Ilona Kossuth passed most of her time in the company of Margaret and me. We went out together to restaurants, the movies, the cabaret and to football matches. We rarely watched TV. On the nights when we stayed in the Ipanema apartment, we chatted. To tell the truth, it was the two young women who did the talking. Ilona spoke two languages that I didn’t know: Swedish and Hungarian. Her parents, originally from Budapest, had immigrated to Sweden before the Second World War. Margareta’s French parents were of Swedish descent.

Margareta translated Ilona’s words when the conversation would interest me. That happened when they talked about Brazil. And how could you not talk about Brazil when in Rio? Ilona, perhaps more than Margareta and me, was under Rio’s charms. Everything in the city fascinated her to tears. In her mouth, the names of the neighborhoods gave off the smell of fresh fruit: Flamengo, Gloria, Catete, Botafogo, Laranjeiras, Copacabana, Ipanema, Morro da Viuva, Leblon, Santa Teresa. Her fascination transformed into cool streams the sweltering crowds of Avenida Rio Branco and the swarming anthill of Cinélandia. She found the Brazil of the beautiful, racist and patrician neighborhoods
to be just as profoundly African-influenced as the Brazil of the *favelas*\textsuperscript{12} and suburbs filled with the spectacular poor.

We used to make stops in the gardens of Rio, our breaths taken away by the exuberance of the foliage. In the Caribbean, I had never seen shades of green that meshed as sensually with the jade green of the sea. I also learned with Ilona and Margereta that the lushest plants can rise up to the highest point of fantasy.

That year, Santa Teresa was still a haven for bougainvillea, palm trees, banana trees, balustraded verandas, areas of cool shade and azulejo-tiled balconies\textsuperscript{13} that overlooked the innocence of the world. Only one thing annoyed Margareta and Ilona during the *fête* that was Rio: the city’s endless human wave around the Guanabara Bay. This geometry of slightly covered buttocks and bellies gave the Brazilian macho men their idea of paradise. To dream in a city where “God so loved curves”, as my friends used to say, one must tear oneself away from its visceral cyclone and bring oneself to Pão de Açúcar, Morro Dois Irmãos, Corcovado, Orgãos, Gávea. At sea level, you can enjoy yourself, even orgasmically, but you can’t dream, they used to insist.

Margareta would translate my response:

“You are saying that because you just got here. You haven’t yet lived a Rio Carnaval. When the Brazilian imagination erupts, sea-level

\textsuperscript{12} Slums.

\textsuperscript{13} Blue and white ceramic tile-work typical in Portuguese and Spanish architecture.
Rio creates a dreamworld with its feet, hips, guts, no less than with its head!”

My two Europeans, one just as beautiful as the other, felt inadequate compared to the feminine curves, that, throughout Brazil, rounded out the living space. They became perplexed when I said to them without demagogic exaggeration that the shape of their bodies, on Copacabana beach, could cause as much vertigo as the constantly moving allure of the Brazilian woman.

What makes the carioca\textsuperscript{14} walk in a roll and pitch singularly hers, and that, compared to her, gives other women a lethargic air, is the fact that her beauty is always excited by the rhythms of nature. She doesn’t stray from it at any moment, whether standing, lying down, walking, or making love. The musical cadence of her presence in the world isn’t a matter of a sumptuously filled bosom or bountiful derriere. You two, also possess these wonders. What are you missing? You were taught from childhood not to give into the rhythm of the night, the trees, the wind, the waters of the earth and sky. This rhythm is in you, nevertheless; it’s the lyrical speech of your blood.”

One Saturday afternoon, some time after that conversation, Margareta and I stayed in the house to do some chores. We had about a hundred books to arrange on a shelf that we had to assemble. All the while we were listening to Mozart concertos. The doorbell rang: it was

\textsuperscript{14} Inhabitant of Rio de Janeiro
Ilona. She came to help us, directly from the beach. Her twenty years smelled of hot salt and some forest animal from Hungary or Sweden. Rio’s sky had keeled over in her naturally blue eyes. Her presence became one with Mozart’s cool notes.

“It’s going to rain”, she said in Portuguese. “A storm is coming from the sea.”

“Great!” I said. “Since you’ve been here, you haven’t seen a real tropical rain. I already know what’s that like. Miraculous rains fell during my Caribbean childhood.”

The first drops began to tap against the living room’s bay window. Then, in an instant, the sky burst open into torrents on Ipanema. We couldn’t see anything outside: only a sheet of rain in a tight-woven fabric, like a ship’s sail. A pleasant shade was cast over the living room. Margareta’s and Ilona’s hair reflected the glow of the hurricane lamp.

Ilona was standing facing the bay window, her mouth agape, breathless before the afternoon’s diluvian rage.

She all at once took off her blouse and bra. Her breasts were shaking to the rhythm of the rain. Margareta’s and my hands trembled beneath the books that we were continuing to arrange. Ilona, in a sort of beatific trance, let slip her skirt and panties. She was the most beautiful Brazilian woman that Rio de Janeiro’s rain could conjure up. The mystical current passed from Ilona to Margareta. My wife also took off
her clothes and went to stand next to her friend. Their very life now was pulsing to the rhythm of the Brazilian weather.

I was crazed with desire and glee. Son of the Caribbean, in the depths of Brazil, I wasn’t a cloven-hoofed and horned Dionysus steering his white goddesses along a path of joy. Carried away by their blood’s very rhythm, Ilona and Margareta were gracefully entering the mystery of our American lands.

I too took off my clothes and came to the window. I found again, suddenly, the momentum of my childhood. Mozart’s sweet harmonies seemed to be coming from far away. It intertwined with the water that was dazzling our beings. On the living-room carpet, I was becoming as madly possessed as Ilona while bearing on my back Margareta’s no-less-dizzying curves. Nothing will ever be as impossible to put into words as the rain of that Rio afternoon.
A Return to Jacmel

Un Retour à Jacmel
One Saturday afternoon, Dr. Hervé Braget came to Jacmel, on a shiny, high-off-the-ground red motorcycle that made as much noise as a tank. He did a whirlwind tour around the small city in the Haitian southwest before stopping at the Place d’Armes, in front of the cottage that his father had set up as a clinic for him. Dr. Braget was the first Haitian from Jacmel to return as a doctor with a Parisian education. His arrival bent over the handlebars of a Harley Davidson was scandalously received. They expected to see him come back to his native country in his father’s Buick. At most they would have accepted that he would come back in a jitney. They would have understood that a young doctor wanted to blend in with the lower classes who used that type of transportation, accompanied by their chickens and other animals.

The cyclist’s outfit was another subject of indignation. He, the son of Timoléon Braget, the honorable coffee exporter, was wearing golf pants, a salmon-colored dress shirt, and a polka-dot bow tie, black stockings, aviator sunglasses, and leather gloves. In Dr. Braget’s accoutrement they didn’t recognize the studious young man, the athlete

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15 Here translated to jitney, a tap-tap is a brightly colored bus or pick-up truck used as a share taxi.
of sober elegance and delicate gestures, that they had seen leave ten years prior.

That night in Jacmel, “bad mouthing” didn’t sleep on an empty stomach. It had both enough to eat and drink on the benches of the Place d’Armes and on living-room couches. No Parisian intern, they said, goes around on a motorcycle, wearing a costume like that, with his socks matching his glasses. Hervé Braget must have picked up such habits in Pigalle or the slums of Barbès-Rouchechouart. His outfit confirmed the gossip that, here and there, had accompanied his antics as a student. At a given moment, he was said to have followed a former Russian ballerina to Tanger. From Tanger he would have gone to Casablanca, where he would have done some prison time after a spell of drug use. Later, his presence had been reported in a Polish city where he had supposedly been teaching Creole to a niece of Marshal Pilsudski. During the winter of 1935, they imagined that he was playing the clarinet in the orchestra that his cousin Thèophile Zelnave had formed in Liverpool. They lost all trace of him in the hold of a New Zealand cargo ship. He was found six months later in the kitchen of a swanky hotel on the Italian Riviera. And then, without warning, he had returned home, resembling more a court jester than a doctor of medicine.

The bigwigs of Jacmel, gathering in the living room of Cécilia Ramonet, out of respect for the Braget family, decide to grant Hervé a
reprieve. They will hold him under observation only as long as it will take him to build a clientele in the city.

In less than six months he had completely won the confidence of his fellow citizens. He had successfully cured flus, whooping cough, malaria, stomach ulcers, hernias, fibroids, gonorrhea, asthma attacks, and nervous breakdowns. At the Saint Thérèse Hospital, they repeatedly called on him to put him to the test. He succeeded at extremely complicated operations, and they said that all of his deliveries were beautifully performed.

As a citizen, he was never accused of any wrongdoing. At the Café de l'Etoile, owned by Didi Brifas, he enthusiastically joined in games of poker. He simply made small talk, without bringing up his memories of the Hôtel-Dieu or the Folies-Bergère. He never bragged about having often drunk aperitifs with Professor Henri Mondor, or about spending weekends in Normandy in the arms of one of Louis Pasteur’s granddaughters.

Knee-deep in work and in the everyday life of Jacmel, Hervé Braget was the Jacmelian’s Jacmelian. He frequented cockfights and giant kite competitions. The last Friday of each month, he could be seen enjoying himself at the ball of gangster-style dances of every description that the president of the Bar, Népomucène Homère, organized at the renowned dance club, Au Rat Mort. Dr. Braget even helped out at baptisms, first communion parties, wedding ceremonies, and at the most humble wakes.
and funerals. More than once, you would see his motorcycle parked near a side door of the church of Saint Philippe and Saint Jacques: Dr. Braget visiting to have a chat with Our Lady of Perpetual Help or asking the Little Jesus of Prague to place his divine feet on the neck of the motorized doctor.

Asked by the distinguished ladies of the Excelsior Society to host a conference on a theme of his liking, one Sunday afternoon, all of the well-read Jacmelians could hear the doctor give a two-hour discourse on “the importance of popular surrealism in American syncretic cults.” Among the fascinated attendees, Madame Cécilia Ramonet was the only one who would say that, in her estimation, if they replaced “popular surrealism” with “baroque eroticism”, they would have a more exact view of the lecturer’s unusual message.

Eight months after Dr. Braget’s return, the local newspaper La Gazette du Sud Ouest published an article penned by president of the Bar, Népomucène Homère, that summarized Jacmel’s feelings:

“The city of poets is henceforth able to pay its debt to Hippocrates. In effect, we have amongst us, in the person of our friend, Dr. Hervé Braget, not only a doctor from the City of Lights, but an authority in the most general of medicines, a savant experienced in the most daring of therapies. Yet, the beginnings of Dr. Braget in his childhood city were very difficult. In his place, any other disciple of Aesculapius would have put away his scalpel and stethoscope and would have bade farewell to a
Jacmel whose superstitions prevented it from entering the modern age. (We know something about that, we the founders of Au Rat Mort). A Harley Davidson and a sport shirt were enough to raise a general outcry against the brilliant son of Timoléon Braget. Today, by poetic justice, the families that pilloried Dr. Braget and invented for him an adventurer’s history are the same ones who express their gratitude. The prodigious child of Aesculapius has shown that there are many strings in his bow as a man of science.”

Dr. Braget’s stock was rising to new heights when the story of an injection sounded a different tune. One Friday morning, Emile Jonassa made an urgent call to Dr. Braget because of migraines that for 48 hours had been keeping his wife glued to her bed. The young couple lived in Saint-Cyr in a cozy house with many floors. Jonassa had his shoemaker’s shop on the ground floor. After accompanying the doctor to the beautiful Erica’s bedside, he left them alone. A half-hour later, the doctor hadn’t come downstairs. Jonassa didn’t resist his urge to go listen at the door, his hammer in hand.

“Breathe…harder…good. Does it hurt here?...Here? Hold your breath. A little shot and you’ll be fine.”

Jonassa was going to go back downstairs, confused in his fit of jealousy, when a familiar sigh of astonishment rattled him to the core. He broke down the door and dealt out several hammer blows to Dr. Braget’s head.
The doctor, his head gashed open, had just enough time to tumble down the stairs and mount his motorcycle. With the speed of an ambulance, he rushed to seek treatment at the hospital. The story of “a motorcycle accident on the Orangers road” didn’t take an hour. Before noon, Jacmel knew that Monsieur Jonassa had found Dr. Braget experimenting on Erica Jonassa with an “intra-vaginal gyratory syringe”.

After such a scandal any man would confine himself at home, in the cocoon of his consultations, to calm the storm. Dr. Braget, to the city’s bewilderment, showed himself everywhere, his head wrapped up, giving a thousand details about the circumstances of his motorcycle accident, looking as if he had recently undergone a trepanation.

Two months later, in the early of the afternoon, a thug came to Adrien Ramonet’s tailoring workshop. He signaled to the owner that he had to talk to him. He cruelly informed him that Madame Ramonet had visited Dr. Braget numerous times in the past several days. Adrien gave the hood a well-placed slap and went back to his scissors. But a moment later, for some pretext or other, he went back home. Denise Ramonet had just arrived.

“Where are you coming from at this hour?”

“Mon chéri, I had a terrible headache. I was so worried I ran to the doctor’s office.”

“What did Dr. Nerval say?”

“Actually, I went to Dr. Braget.”
“Since when is he the family doctor?”

“He lives closer.”

Adrien pretended to believe her and returned to his work. Then two days later, at the same time, he went to the Place d’Armes, and hid on a bench under an old tree. He didn’t see anyone enter Dr. Braget’s office. He was going to leave when the thug from before made an appearance.

“Monsieur Ramonet, the day before yesterday you hit me for no reason. An honest family man doesn’t deserve to ride a motorcycle... Your wife comes and goes through the side door...”

Adrien Ramonet took his head in his hands. Glimmers of murder clouded his senses.

“What would you have done if you were in my place?” he heard his voice ask the thug.

“Me, I would have gotten another cutie. We have plenty of those in Jacmel.”

He got up and ran to his house. He filled two suitcases with clothes. With the young man’s help, he was about to reach the door when Denise arrived, out of breath, her eyes shining from a pleasant fatigue.

“Adrien, are you taking a trip? What are you doing?”

“To hell with your doctor and ‘his many strings’, you damned bitch!”

“Adrien, chéri, listen!”
The new scandal made more noise than the preceding one. Adrien was one of the sons of Cécilia Ramonet, the only widow in Jacmel that they often called by the first name of her late husband: César! General César Ramonet was someone who mattered in the city’s history. Cécilia Ramonet, after learning that Dr. Braget had just outraged her family, fell into a blind rage. It took the strength of several tailors to hold her back from immediately going, as she said, “to give an anatomy lesson to Dr. Braget’s balls.” She brandished an enormous pair of scissors that, she cried, “hadn’t just fallen from the sky.”

That evening, César ultimately exchanged the idea of personal vengeance for the adoption of a “series of measures” to put an end to Dr. Braget’s “motophallic escalation.” César, in a gendarme general’s voice, dictated to the bigwigs assembled in her living room the following decision: “primo, no high society woman of Jacmel will henceforth place a foot in Dr. Braget’s clinic; secundo, no honorable family will ever invite into their homes a doctor who so vilely betrays the Hippocratic Oath; tertio, Hervé Braget is banished from the Excelsior Society; quarto, the prefect will forbid by decree all motorcycle noise after five in the evening and before ten in the morning; quinto, one of the city’s mischief-makers will paint in red on the door of the unworthy doctor:”

**DANGER: Dr. Hervé rides a motophallus!**

Dr. Braget’s response dropped like a bomb. He cleaned his beautiful front door and had engraved on a bronze plaque:
Dr. Horny Braget\textsuperscript{16}

Gynecophile

Doctor of the University of Paris

The following Friday, they danced like crazy at the \textit{Au Rat Mort}. A frenzied meringue celebrated the man who dared to proclaim his gynecophilism to the world. From then on there was no more of Cécilia Ramonet, just an angry César who went to consult Okil Okilon, a formidable bush doctor of the region, to cast a curse on the doctor.

The advent of Hurricane Bathsheba made everyone superstitiously believe that Dr. Braget was born lucky. He helped to revive and rehouse hundreds of victims. He indicated the hygienic measures necessary to avoid an epidemic. They saw his motorcycle traveling the countryside to flooded areas. The rumor even spread that his engine was amphibious and that it would sometimes fly when the river’s flood wouldn’t let him pass.

With the hurricane gone, there was a great calm in Jacmel’s harbor, in the trees on the Place d’Armes, and in the minds that Dr. Braget’s mystery had been upsetting. This truce lasted until the last days of the year.

To the west of the Place d’Armes, there was a convent and school of the sisters of Saint Rose of Lima. Jacmel loved these nuns who came

\textsuperscript{16} In the original French, Dr Braget paints on his door, “Dr Hervé Braguette”. Braguette means a man’s zipper or fly.
from far away to share its problems of education and spiritual elevation. Amongst the sisters, there was one, Sister Nathalie of the Angels, who was particularly loved for her piety, kindness, and cheerful devotion. She had another virtue: her voice provided a mystical element to the choir of Saint Philippe and Saint Jacques. The president of the Bar, Népomucène Homère, went to the services just to listen, to what he described in *La Gazette du Sud Ouest* as, “the pure water of that Gregorian voice rolling over pebbles polished by the hands of God.” One Sunday night, Sister Nathalie of the Angels returned from vespers in an alarming state: she had the shakes, her teeth were chattering, her limbs were stretched out at her sides. At midnight, her fever was higher than 40 degrees. After praying for some time, Mother Superior crossed the Place d’Armes and brought Dr. Braget to the sick girl’s bedside. He listened to her chest with infinite delicacy, in the presence of a half-dozen sisters, who, kneeling with rosaries in hand, stood guard in the bedroom. He stated his diagnosis and indicated a treatment. Three days later, Sister Nathalie was able to return to her classes. At the noon respite, she went personally to thank the eminent doctor. Three months after, the Mother Superior confided to Jacmel’s vicar, Père Naélo, that Sister Nathalie of the Angel was expecting Dr. Braget’s baby. The nun was discretely put aboard the first cargo ship headed for Europe. Even though the secret around the motorcycle accident was well kept, Jacmel had the feeling that something was amiss in the rushed departure of Sister Nathalie of
the Angels. Imaginations ran wild: Dr. Braget could impregnate from a
distance any woman that he wanted. When he came across a young
woman or a swarm of young women, he had only to direct on their pubic
area the “fertilizing beam” that he had fixed onto the headlight of his
motorcycle, to pierce instantly through tissues and hymens.

Jacmel was at that point when Holy Week arrived. Since the last
one, the city had lived through several scandals. One of them had driven
it to the edge of the abyss. Père Naélo admonished them from the pulpit:
“Jacmel, victim of the sins of its inhabitants, deserved a Good Friday that
would mark a milestone in the poetic stories of the Passion!” The vicar of
Saint Phillipe and Saint Jacques invited the Jacmelians to mount the
Calvary with a Christ who had suffered more that usual. It was
necessary that the city’s streets, travelled by wheels of evil, should
ardently participate in the mystery of the Redemption. The procession of
the cross left at three o’clock from the church. On the north side of
Jacmel, an elevation symbolized the drama of the Mount of Olives. When
one of the city’s longshoremen was about to carry the heavy wooden
cross, Dr. Hervé Braget suddenly came forward and offered his young
shoulders. He was dressed in black golf pants and a yellow cassock worn
by those of yore who were condemned to burn at the stake of the
Inquisition. Dr. Braget’s san-benito shone beneath the lion-sun of the
Caribbean. Cries rose from the crowd when they recognized the man
taking the role of the Crucified. The drama of the passion broke out
immediately: men and women began to spit on Dr. Braget. Children began to throw rocks. Fanatics hurled insults. In the blink of an eye, someone made him a thorny crown of barbed wire and placed it on his head. At that moment, Braget fell for the first time. The crowd broke out in a Good Friday hymn. The doctor got up, covered in sweat, bleeding from his ears, his mouth half open, his face transfigured, with a sort of radiance in his features.

When he fell for the second time, a current of intense emotion seized the crowd. Some people cried, “Ecce Homo”, while others continued to shout increasingly crude insults. There were scenes of hysteria when the shoemaker Emile Jonassa began to push his way through the crowd to come closer to the doctor. He was carrying a hammer and giant nails in his hands.

“Crucify him for real!” cried Cécilia Ramonet.

“Let’s crucify him!” numerous voices echoed.

But Jonassa, reaching Braget, threw the hammer and nails at his feet. He then humbly offered himself to help Braget carry the cross.

“Long live Simon of Cyrene!”

“Simon the Just! Ecce Homo!” they cried from all sides.

Several people had tears in their eyes. But the abuse continued to shower, along with rocks and rotten eggs. Dr. Braget fell five more times in succession on the rugged coastline that led to the sanctuary. He was harassed. Some young women, amongst the most beautiful jewels in the
city, wiped his eyes and ears with their batiste kerchiefs. One of them did it with such tenderness that a glow of mercy suddenly wiped away from Braget’s face the mystery of his suffering and his mercy, to expose the innocence of a punished child. The candor that suddenly arose from his being made him oblivious to the fact that the crowd was jeering. In this state, Braget crossed the last meters that separated him from the area of the Calvary where he was to leave the cross. The Good Friday hymn rose up again. This time, it blended with the breeze of the Caribbean Sea that was wafting softly over Calvary Hill.

At 10:30 that evening, some news spread like wildfire. Madeleine Dacosta hadn’t returned to her parents’ house. At the end of the procession, they saw her heading towards the nice neighborhood where she lived at the far end of the city, in the company of several young women. When did she separate from her friends? To go where? After the ceremony, the people, filled with light, weariness and devotion, quickly went back to their homes. Madeleine Dacosta was 17 years old. It was enough to see her walking, swimming, horse riding, eating, dancing, bending down to pick something up, and going down stairs, to know that she was born to remain a *femme-jardin* for at least a half a century. In the procession, she was the one who most intensely showed her mercy when the Son of Man seemed to suffer the most.

That didn’t stop Cécilia Ramonet from thinking the worst when she learned about her goddaughter’s disappearance: Madeleine is in Dr.
Braget's bed! Her blood ran cold. She bolted towards the Place d'Armes. Night was falling. She stepped as closely as possible to Braget's clinic. She first saw the motorcycle parked in the courtyard, and then the doctor pacing back and forth on the veranda in his penitent's costume. She breathed a sigh of relief and went immediately to reassure her friend Germaine, Madeleine's mother. She found her stretched out on a couch with compresses on her forehead.

The Dacosta household was filled with friends, neighbors, and curious people, as though they were at a wake. They repeated to themselves that Madeleine was not a girl who would commit suicide or go on some adventure. Her disappearance on Good Friday evening couldn't have been anything but a mystery. That's what Cécilia Ramonet was explaining to them. But at the stroke of midnight, she changed her mind. She suddenly got up from her seat and cried:

“My goddaughter is in danger, it's me, César who's telling you!”

She immediately flung her shawl loosely around her neck. They hadn't seen her do this with as much resolution since 1922. She rushed to the rectory to ask Père Naélo to sound the alarm. Fifteen minutes later, César found herself heading a police squad, a dozen firefighters, and a substantial number of volunteers. She proposed that they systematically search Jacmel, house by house, including the tourist resorts in Meyer and Les Orangers.
They thoroughly searched Jacmel from top to bottom. Honorable families and madams, thugs and prostitutes alike, had to open their doors, closets, and trunks. Not even the Institution of the Brothers of Christian Teachings was spared, or the convent of the Sisters of Saint Rose de Lima, who, in their prayers, weren’t able to keep from associating the afternoon’s Christ with the man who had damned their beloved Nathalie of the Angels!

Around three in the morning, when the search was still in vain, president of the bar Népomucène Homère began spreading a long-forgotten belief: a man and woman who fornicate on Good Friday, forgetting the mystery of the Passion, are condemned to stay stuck together for a long period of time. They together form between them a knot of flesh, one single accursed navel that even the pope’s stole cannot undo!

The sun rose on this legend while the searchers went home to sleep, tired from following Madeleine Dacosta’s traces in vain. The most selfish of them said that, in any case, Madeleine was old enough to be in control of the beautiful garden that she had received from the good Lord. Cécilia Ramonet wasn’t having any of that. The César in her kept her vigilant in her firm hope of finding the young girl. She could hardly stand on her legs as she followed a path running along the Gosseline River. Suddenly, she caught sight of a small house, very out of the way, shaded by a group of mango trees.
“Let’s go over there,” she said to Père Naélo.

After a minute, she stopped abruptly, her eye fixed on a specific object.

“Look, mon Père, over there, at the edge of the arbor, do you see that shining piece of metal?”

“Where, César? I don’t see anything,” said the vicar.

“I do,” she said as she took off in a sprint.

She left the path and cut through a field of banana trees. After about a hundred meters, she made out Dr. Braget’s motorcycle. Parked under the arbor, an end of the exhaust pipe was peeking through the area of the enclosure.

César went directly to the door of the hut, and knocked on it loudly.

“Who’s there?” asked a man’s voice.

“I know your voice, Judas Iscariot. Open the door!” ordered César.

“The door isn’t locked,” said the man.

Cécilia César Ramonet opened the door, making a sign to the others to wait outside. The two lovers were naked, side by side in the rapture of the night and of their last orgasm. Hervé Braget pushed aside the sheet that César hurriedly threw over them.

“Get up, goddaughter. I’m taking you back home,” César said.

“Listen, godmother”, said Madeleine, “Mind your business, because for Hervé and me a Saturday of glory has only just begun!”
The Holy Week lovers had to leave town, by motorcycle that very day. They were never to be seen again in Jacmel. Their legend took shape immediately. César and Père Naélo, entering the small house at the edge of the river, didn’t find anyone. There was indeed an unmade bed that revealed the love games of a spellbound couple. César began to look around in all the corners of the room where the lovers had been. She soon discovered under the bed, male and female genitals, still in ultimate awe of each other, engaged in one final struggle. Père Naélo threw himself on his knees at seeing the miracle. But, in an instant, the two sexes, realizing that they were before witnesses, transformed into a pair of wings. A single bird happily flew into the immense blue of Jacmel’s Saturday. Once every ten years, this bird of paradise comes to rest on one of the kapok trees on the lover’s lane, from which suddenly, the Place d’Armes overlooks the Caribbean Sea, and the tides of dreams continuously swell and break the world over.