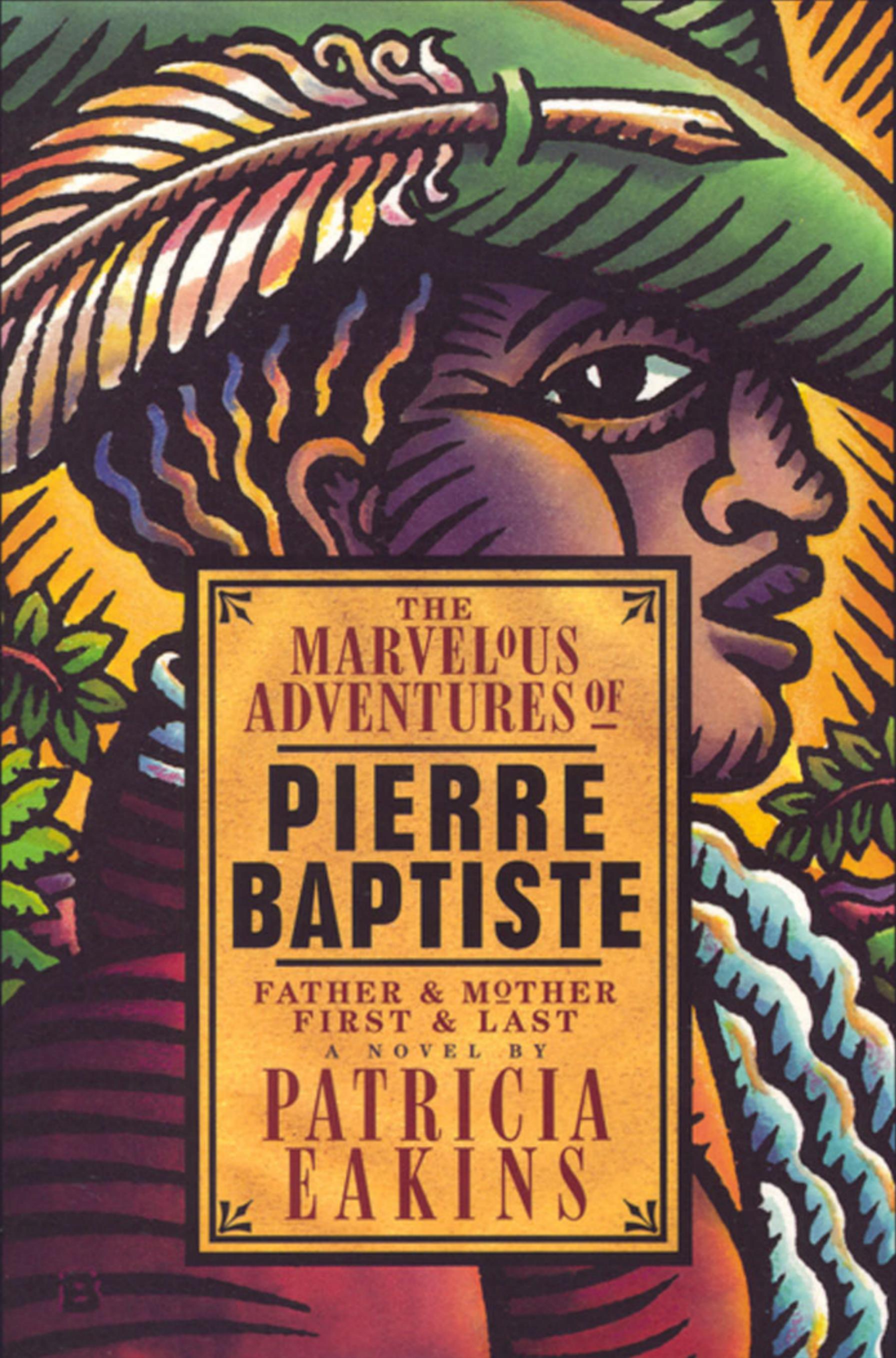


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THE  
MARVELOUS  
ADVENTURES OF  
**PIERRE  
BAPTISTE**

FATHER & MOTHER  
FIRST & LAST

A NOVEL BY

**PATRICIA  
EAKINS**

**The Marvelous Adventures of**  
**Pierre Baptiste**  
**Father and Mother**  
**First and Last**

**NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS  
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**NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS**  
**New York and London**

PATRICIA EAKINS

# The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste Father and Mother First and Last

Including:

*The Tribulations of Bondage in the Sugar Isles*  
*Pierre's Escape from Certain Harm to His Person*  
*How He Was Marooned*  
*His Friends & Religion*  
*His True Wife & Fishy Consorts*  
*His Children, Born from His Mouth Like Words*

➤

*Physics and Metaphysics*  
*Cyclopedish Histoire*  
*Flora, Fauna, & Mysteriosi*  
*Revenge and Devotion*  
*Divinations*  
*Commonplace Book*

➤

Being a True Account of the Life and Times of an African Man of Letters,  
a Son of Guinée Born into Bondage,  
Whose Ambitions Were Realized in STRANGE AND UNEXPECTED WAYS,  
Yet Who Made His PEACE with Several Gods  
and Established A REALM of Equality & Freedom & Bounty,

➤

in Which No Creature Lives from Another's Labor.

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**FOR GEORGE CHAMBERS  
WHO MORE THAN ANY OTHER SHOWED THE WAY**



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## *Overture*



WHO FINDS and reads this testament, GREETINGS: It is I, Pierre, who have scribed with sharpened gull's-wing feather dipped in ink of squid and ash. I, PIERRE BAPTISTE, FATHER AND MOTHER, FIRST AND LAST, have scratched on paper woven and pounded by my offspring. With stone mauls have we flaked the arks of rock in which the several books repose. With levers and pulleys and our own strong backs have we raised the cairns of sweat-rolled rock that loft my screeds' sarcophagi, raising them above the tides that in hurricane season roll across our isle. And so the arks are skulls of stone in which the words of my tongue are enbalméd, for I refuse to yield to Death.

You who read my words have raised with your own hands, or hands of your servants, the tight-fitting covers of the arks. And so corresponding labors, patiences, & wills marry us for the covenant, your reading of my testament. Would your discovery resurrect my person, yet I doubt you shall find me quick. Shall you find my offspring? Their offspring? My consorts and their ilk? "*La plus grande merveille*," said the great Buffon, "*c'est dans la succession*." All the greater the marvel when the succession were

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untoward. Like any dramatic voyage, mine must commence *in medias res*, yet I cast off in a swift-stopping lyric mode, limning my consorts in portrait fit as I can muster, being a man whose hours of light are much taken up.

THEY SING from both sides of their mouths, this I can vouchsafe. On calm, cloudless nights, when the dome of heaven is bright with stars, they lie in the breaking moonlit waves, combing them to ribbons, silver rushing through their teeth. Yet, while they live, they are never truly in repose. Their gold-and-pink-flecked bodies quiver in foam, their green-white tresses writhe like eels among strands of sea-weed, while fishes fin in the shifting tangles.

The consorts themselves I would name *fish*, from the wound-red gill slits puckering behind their ears, the pointed teeth in their lipless mouths; I would name them *frogs* from their round gold eyes. Yet frogs do not have the hands of women, lovely as lace but without nails. And could fish construct the “cities,” the minuscule towers spiraling from reefs? Beneath the glimmer and shift of waves, the towers appear solid, adamantine edifices. Yet I have dived to grasp at their spires, only to squeeze a crumbling, then to peer at craters in the reefs. Around me, hidden in clouds of sediment, specks of tower turned among bubbles. Were they bubbles of my own breath or bubbles of the consorts’ laughter? Did the faithless consorts crouch behind the reef, snorting in cupped hands?

Oh, sometimes, did I bathe at night, they have chased me, moonlit bodies glittering in foam. Oh, then have I seen their locky tendrils trailing the spines of breakers, their fingers long on the waves. Then have I heard their singing, their chorale without returns. Once I was caught, in embrace near-fatal; it was my shadow the sea shade caressed, my shadow vanishing under the breakers.

## OVERTURE

I DID COAST IN atop these amorous, delusome waves, a-bobble in a rum keg, a chattel-servant escaped of a sugar-cane planter of Saint-Michel, of the French Anduves. My plan were to float into a shipping lane to be taken aboard some packet as errant specimen cargo, viz., the salted-down carcasses of birds for Buffon's cabinet. I would be transported to France to the eminent natural historian, for I had marked the keg "*M. de Buffon, Intendant, Jardin du Roi, Paris.*" Once arrived, I would be esteemed a savant, to stroll among the flowers & fountains of the garden and to study the stuffed & mounted animals and the mineral curiosities of the cabinet, and to enjoy the duties and perquisites of philosophy, for according to law I would be free on touching the soil of France. And a free man can rise to his worth.

Had not Graman QUASSI escaped from Suriname and made his way to Holland and so become free? Had he not brought with him a tea of bitter wood, useful in treating fevers and worms? Had he not found favor in the eyes of Linnaeus, who named the bitter tree for him? Were not BUFFON a more magnanimous genius than Linnaeus with his carping taxonomy of life?

But alas! My cask having drifted from the lanes, I was sucked into a serpent's gut and vomited on this wild shore, near or far from the isle I had fled. I feared I would be caught, and returned to my master, and whipped with the stinger, and caged in the sun without food or water, and sold to a master worse than Auguste Henri Lemoyne Dufay, the very same so celebrated for his portraits of creatures, who governed the movements of pencils and brushes lamentably better than the twists and turns of his own affairs. Now read the account, in its several parts, of my escape and my life as a free man. I will tell in time what I know of the fates of my several connections, including my beloved WIFE.

## PART THE FIRST

### *The Garden of Fishes*



MY MASTER'S TEMPER were by spasms choleric, the spasms exacerbated by trespass, real or fancied, of his slaves, all of whom had had occasion to beg their fellows daub their backs with salve of rum and lard. Yet Dufay had raised up drivers to lash the hands to work, drivers on whom he palmed off most of the stewardship, that he might dedicate himself to advancement of universal knowledge. Far from the carries where his hands labored, he tramped in sun and rain, peering under leaves, down burrows, and up into nests to discover and name what creatures inhabited the wilderness parts of his domain.

An excellent draftsman, he delighted in sketching particulars of feather, fur, and scale; the curve of claws, of teeth and beaks; the depths of eyes; the stretch and shove of limbs. On sketching expeditions to the rockiest, most surf-pounded tips of Saint-Michel, he spied from blinds he had had constructed on narrow ledges, to watch the sea birds fighting and fishing and rutting. (Some said he spied on the slaves, yes, on his own wife and children, in like manner, but I never saw him loiter in the shadows of human habitation.)

## THE GARDEN OF FISHES

From the age of five, I, whom the whites called Goody, had been laboring in the carries, coughing from the fire that burned off the leaves, stepping and stooping to chop the canes and singing between my gritted teeth to keep the bone-grinding pace. One day, M'sieu was riding his mare past the gang, his cockaded hat abob on Yolande's trot as he passed on his way to more tangled parts of our isle to sketch. His old servant trotted behind, one Christophe, called Long-Shanks, carrying the tools of his master's art. Alas, this worn-out soul, Christophe, keeled over; without further adieu, he gave up the ghost and died.

"Hop! Hop! Hop! Do not leave Long-Shanks sprawl to be chewed by dogs," said M'sieu to his driver. "Yet pick out a sturdy young boy to wait on me at once! Not again a scrawny dotard too worn-out to lift." And, rueful-ironic, he doffed his hat to Christophe.

Pierre was called from the gang then, to lay down his bill and serve the master as porter. Wiggling joyful I was, who had no notion what a world of fetching made a BODY SERVANT'S WORK! Though I was then a strapping youth of ten, they had not yet given me a pair of pants. So, on the first day I turned my eyes from cane to follow Yolande's tail, I did not look around me much, but only mulled over the question: Would I get a pair of drawers? And when I did, that very eve, and not coarse Osnaberg, but silk, however faded, I strutted like a cock, and capered to the piping of the cane flute, the first capers I had cut in a very long time, for my smock had ceased to cover my privates, and I had learnt to shrink over Johnny Fish.

Yet the drawers they had given me were pantaloons from years before, very baggy and covered with tufted ribbon loops. And these stale fancies gave great merriment to Pamphile, the master's son, and his stepmother, who swore they would grow my frizz to a full-bottom—"he would need no curling iron, and nits would lose

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themselves in the maze”—and send me over the seas to court, to wait on the jades that yawned around the King. And they conceived a plot, to give me a name from antiquity, like a hero's in a tragedy, but M'sieu stamped his foot and swore, "I'll be damned if I learn a new name I must cry in the bush when I call for a snare set."

At night, in the dark, I lay with the fancy pants in my hammock. With my fingers I tugged at the falls, so they tore, and, when I donned the pantaloons, revealed Johnny Fish to the company.

"The stuff be so old it has rotted," I allowed.

So they gave me some drawers more plain and recent.

Once decently covered, I straightened my back and willingly shouldered THE MASTER'S EASEL. I looked about me smartly, as he enjoined me over Yolande's withers: "Observe the curious cunning with which Nature has devised the creatures."

Dutifully at first I gaped at the mole, all fur and snout, with shovelly hands, that blindly hunches and wriggles a path like an endless pant leg to inhabit. How came he to Saint-Michel? Did he tunnel under the sea? Or was he pushing like a hungry root at Creation?

The island had not the variety of creatures, allowed M'sieu, that are known on the continents; yet creatures there were sufficient to preoccupy an inquiring philosopher, most particularly the varieties of lizard and bird. And soon enough Pierre began to observe for the pleasure of the scrutiny. There very greatly charmed him the red-and-green throat of one small lizard, puffed like a lady's coily dropped handkerchief as the creature took the sun. All languor he lolled till he cast his tongue to snag a fly! Servant no less than master marveled at the parakeets, their feathers brighter than flowers, cleaning themselves with their toes and hooking with their beaks the mites, smaller than lice, that inhabited their feathers' underbrush.

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And the white egret, and in season, the blue heron.

Then there were fishes, more multivarious than birds, a garden of flesh in the waters, impossible to catch and hold, their form their movement, their movement one with the water they had their being in, the salty tear-drenched garden of the dead my godmothers had told me of, where I did not want to linger, though I ate any fish my elders caught, for I knew they took the fish with gratitude, and were forgiven.

The master did not trust the waters any more than I, though his dead slept beneath the earth, patient as seeds, waiting their time. Yet Dufay would not take off his shoes to wet his feet in the sea, let alone remove his clothes to wet his person. He did not like it, that was all; he did not care for it, so he said. 'Twas a slimy, endless chaos; he did not want it to impinge on his person.

Still, he must have fish to sketch and paint if his natural history were to be complete. So it fell to me to catch these fish, yet without spoiling their form. So I must into the sea. If I would not do it, he would send me back to the fields. Yet I knew not how to comport myself in the sea, nor did my master. Yet he would teach me by hypothesis, trying one expedient then another.

First, he had me dangled as bait on a rope he tied to a pole held by two big men. And he lowered me choking and bellowing into the sea, till I learned to hold my breath. And he bade me agitate my arms and legs, like a human mill, and thus make myself an engine for motion in the sea. And when he saw my terrors had eased, he bade the two men throw me in, without the rope or the pole, so I must save myself with the motions I had learned. And in this manner I was trained to be nimble in the sea, to capture the fishes Dufay would sketch.

As I must paddle about with a spear in one hand, so I must keep the other, and both my legs, in motion, as an ox on a treadmill, to churn myself afloat. Yet—could I quiet my heart that

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pounded loud in my ears as depths rose to claim me, could I bring myself to open my eyes—then I saw, not the flesh-shrouded bones of the dead, but a paradise shimmering in veils of light. Surely the dead must be at peace in their garden of fish. I prayed I would be forgiven for plucking blossoms of flesh, not to eat, but for M'sieu to paint. Yet the longer I spent in the garden of the dead, the less fearsome seemed the prospect of death. Was I not floating in a bliss that laved me, luxuriant and enjoyable? So Pierre splashed among his ancestors' souls, visible only as movement in water. He celebrated their sweet repose, free of the whites who feared to set foot in their domain. Seeing how Pierre smiled when he rose for breath, the master clapped his hands and patted his slaveman's head.

"Good Goody," he said. "Good boy. Do you fetch me the fish, one by one, I will capture their likenesses."

Alas! Though I popped to the surface with a spear-dead fish for him to sketch, or even a live one, squirming to escape and smothering in air, there was no way to capture the gracile essence save by immersion. So much the worse for M'sieu, his knowledge and his art. He did not revere the fish, and his stiff fillets, dull eyes already rotting, were not his truest portraits. He never even saw the hermaphrodite plants, with thick stalks and bright-petaled flowers, yet with roots emerging from the calyx, squirming and grasping at tiny fish, which they did feed into the calyx as hands would stuff a mouth. For M'sieu did not believe Pierre when Pierre spoke of them, and offered to bring one up, though it might be a pet of the dead. M'sieu did not believe a slave-man could discover creatures a master had not. "Tut tut!" he said.

'Twere not merely underwater creatures M'sieu so blindly eschewed. For he took apoplectic fits at the sight of certain vermin, viz., the legions of rats that encamped in his fields to commandeer cane. M'sieu refused to limn them, though most assuredly

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they be “principal fauna.” And I do suspect they are as dear to their Creator as any other creature.

Some other planters would eat the rats—oh, not when friends came to dine, but for a family dinner. Why not? The creatures have fed on sugar; their flesh is sweet. And as they eat so much of our crop, to eat them in turn is a sensible economy. Yet our M’sieu forbore this dainty for himself and his; the old mistress—the first one, the haughty and pious—sent the slave-children into the fields, to hunt and catch the rats, that at very little cost to the whites we slaves might daily dine on flesh, and so keep up our strength, without our sweat smelling fishy, or any expense for pork or beef. At the same time, we would help to save the crop.

This scheme fermented among us great bubbles of resentment—we to eat what the whites refuse as unfit? Our people left the vermin corpses for pigs, preferring to feed our strength with fish leaping fresh to the net, the gift of death to life, and so much the better if our sweat stank. Come Mardi Gras we hung that mistress in effigy, her figure sewed of sacking stuff, a block of wood for a missal in her paw. This straw mistress we roasted above our bonfire. When she burned, she gave out a satisfying, piteous plaint, for we had filled her body with rats and mice.

No more than PILFERING VERMIN or INVADING INSECTS were we slaves to be discovered in M’sieu’s chaste pencil-and-chalks or his fastidious ink-washes, unless we be those dim, tiny, bent figures seen from afar in rippling fields of cane. Front and center the feathered creatures, most especially those of a gaudy and brilliant plumage and distinguished profile, with warrior’s crest and aquiline beak. Dearer to Pierre the drab pelican, its beak a belly of fish, and after the pelican, among featherless creatures, the crab that skulked in the brush, till, spying an enshelled slime shuck off his outgrown house, Sergeant Crab nipped in to occupy. How quaint to see patrolling crabs reconnoiter tunnelish paths

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through the brush, a rag-tag army in purloined uniforms. Were these the army of maroons, the runaway slaves, my godmothers spoke of in whispers?

In time the habits of pirate crabs seemed no less strange than the CHARACTER OF M'SIEU himself. For though he deemed himself a well-bred man, he observed no niceties of deportment or dress. Indeed, by the time he threw me his breeches, they were out at the knee, his coat tattered streamers; I would rather get my clothes, of lesser stuff, from the captain of the drivers, Master Squint, of whom more later. But as for M'sieu, he forgot to close up his falls when he pissed. When his servant was slow, and he took a fit of pique and dressed himself, he rolled one stocking over his breeches, buckled his cuff over the other. He consistently forgot to wind the watch he carried on a chain, and he ignored the beating of the dinner gong.

Once, when his brother's agents came from France, he bade me shave his head, though I had not the knack of the razor and nicked him more than once. He would not pay a barber, you see. Yet over his wounds, his full-bottom snugged his head most accommodating, so he might have cut a good figure had he not dragged from his fraying cuff a huge nasty rag to wipe his nose after pinching snuff. Those come from France remarked, he had lost the habit of bowing, though surely he had had it once.

He never took a man's hand nor kissed a lady's, but only nodded absently when presented—did I say “kiss a lady”? When sober, he fondled neither maids nor men and eschewed intrigues, though when he had drunk himself sodden amidst a crush of planters he indulged in the jovial pinch. And now and then took a woman without ceremony, as a dog smelling rut, and so had fathered a brat or two in the yard.

His visitors returned to France, his wig gathered dust on a stand, the hair of his head pushed in tufts around his bald pate,

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like the tonsure of a depraved monk, so devilish wild he must wear a nightcap so as not to fright the maids. Yet there were worse.

Had he kept his counsel, he might have been a tolerable master, save he exacted from those he lorded it over punctilios he himself forswore. Madame, his second young wife—the first had died in a fluxy sweat—he bade dress and speak as a queen, though she minced through the pantry fearful of scorpions. Badgering the maids to scrape the mold off hanging meat, she must wear three sleeve flounces, & a sack, & a useless apron of lace, & a pinner with trailing lappets. She must be rouged and powdered, and patched and plucked, and teeter on high heels, her head dressed out with false curls. She must embroider perfect lilies on the household linens and read the scriptures every day as befitted a lady who, though born in these islands, had been schooled in a convent in France. M'sieu flew into fits of pique did he catch her with her sleeves rolled, calling her "Rogue" and lambasting her as a slavey.

POOR MADAME! She struck false notes on the pianoforte, the keys of which the air's moistness had swollen from tune. Her thread often tangled as she passed and repassed her needle. M'sieu then pined for a wife who knew what to do with the keys at her waist. Indeed children tittered in their sleeves as she passed with her nose in the air. And though she would crack those keys on a servant's skull, the smell of meat that had hung too long could not be masked with spice and wine. Yet again the bread was not too stale for willful jaw to crack! It is true the stuffing poked from the chairs, but M'sieu himself had scored the silk with the rowels of his spurs, neglecting to call for his boots taken off.

If M'sieu's wife were buffeted by his fits of discontent, consider: his slaves were entirely at his mercy. Pierre who had been trained to catch a bird unharmed with his hands did marvel at his master's alternation between three states: the first, a profound,

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faithful, & innocent regard for the animals he observed; the second, an absent-minded, brisk accord with his fellow human beings, including myself; the third, a sudden & violent animosity toward all Creation, which consumed his bandy-legged, potbelly person and laid waste roundabout. Was the tyrant who snapped his quills and tore his paper the same who stood so still to lure a lizard the tomtits lit on his head? In his rages he caned me and whipped me, yet still I pitied him. For, though a slave, I did live within myself a free man, master; M'sieu the converse.

Yet HIS DRAWINGS were all control, more exact than Nature herself had been, so scrupulously did he render the shape of each lineament, each color shade or tint, each hillock and valley of musculature and quirk of physiognomy, so exactly did he capture the needle-prick stare of the hawk and the desperate trembling gaze of the mouse, for whose delicate and whiskery deliberations he forgave its resemblance to the loathed rat.

Yes, and the thorny brush, the bent of which reveals the wind; the smoke tree's haze of ground twigs; the monstrous hairy sour-sap fruit; the manchineel with its blistering milk, its horrible charmy apples—ah, First Woman!—the amaranth, center stalks a fountain of blood; the rocks and the stones, earth with its packings and crumbings—yes, so truly did M'sieu draw all these, so meticulously paint, with such accurately mixt colors, one might have thought him a devil, tempting poor sinners, take one hesitant, fateful step into the world of his creation, a world seeming purer than our own, in which each creature, nay each rock, turns always for inspection, if not its best side, then at least that side most expressing its essence.

The purity came from this effect: though M'sieu did limn the animals precisely in all proportions and attributes, he refused to draw the shadows that, contrasting with the dapple of light, revealed and covered them. Were I to judge from the plates in books, the rendering of shadow, velvet and dense or hazy and

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dim, does give to the painted world its appearance of movement, suggesting alternation of day and night, and hence the round of seasons, the progress through shift and transformation to death, and thence to life again, from which no man can escape. Yet in the works of M'sieu, Creation is suffused in a pure, bright, even light, as if all creatures were caught in the terrible stillness before the palsy strikes, the storm breaks, the lava flows, caught in this moment as in Eternity, not the eternity of Paradise, earned by the good, but a terrible stasis, the paralysis of Sun's merciless glare. Ah, what be any man but damned who casts no shadow? Shadow, shadow, the dark blot of being, stain of the blood waters, deep and heavy and old, mark of suffering, God's fiery tears, trail of ashes drenching our bones. He who casts no shadow, is he not unquiet in quiet forever, dead in life and live in death?

In one other more mundane particular the art of M'sieu lacks verisimilitude: in the vine-swagged jungles that climb the mountain sides; in the groves of mango and orange trees, flaunting their gauds of fruit; among the tidy coffee trees; the cutlass-leaved bananas; the feathery palms; deep in the cane carries' green and land-locked sea, the island of Saint-Michel, like this, where abides Pierre, be festooned with a florid plant called *orchid*, which displays itself in sun and shade, windward and leeward, high and low. M'sieu would not draw the brown-bagged blossoms, and cursed and stamped if he found but a grain of the pollen on his sleeve, calling for me to brush from him the devil-take-the-stinking-fish-hole crumbs. AH! If Buffon had come out from France, he would have seen in what respects his *histoire* of these islands be incomplete. Yet many an artful work was sent to France for engraving, and Pierre vaunted himself he served a worthwhile master, though sorely the master tried his servant.

Those of HIS FINISHED WORKS M'sieu cherished too greatly to send forth, he locked in his old campaign chest with several

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tattered standards and a sword he had worn in battles with Protestants before he came out to the Anduves. There in his chest he supposed his *oeuvre* would be safe from theft or spite or the depredations of rats or of armies. Alas! The chest was not close-fitted. In the leathern interior damp took hold and bred up slimes to soften the paper, spoil the colors, and blur the exact outlines of the images. This I discovered one evening in a damp season when the company sat till midnight smoking pipes and drinking toasts from a bowl of fired brandy. Forsooth, I was ashamed to see M'sieu debauch himself among idlers. To cool the rebellious heat that rose in my head with the fumes of the burnt brandy the dissipates imbibed, I ventured into the keeping room, to pick the lock of the campaign chest, as oft I did, for the sole purpose of examining, however furtively and briefly, the pictures and notes stored within, to renew my sense of my master's worth.

What a PUTREFACTION did I spy and smell! From the pigments on his pages there bloomed a terrible colony of proliferating, stunted monsters, regiments of blue & green & white spoilers, obliterating the limpid symmetries of M'sieu's vision, as if creatures of shadow and orchid-dust mites, obscure, hot vermin and hermaphrodite flora-fauna he had refused to draw, had vengefully mingled their juices and their rage and given birth to generations of vileness so wicked their stench was worse than death. All was rotting, beyond rotting, and would soon be lost altogether, as I pray my own pages, in their careful confinement, will not. Indeed, I did not like to think what life might fly from his trunk into the world, a greater plague than Pandora set free (though of course I did not yet know of her), without any mitigating hope.

To stifle the slimy creatures, I hastily doused the *oeuvre* in a dusty particulate reserved for the wigs, which did whiten those heads and smother nits and might, the Gods be willing, sweeten the moldering pages in the chest. This good powder did possess a

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most pleasing scent, mixed of many magical essences of the several flowers of France, compounded with musk and orris root. It did indeed seem to stifle the odor like rancid cheese and stale piss that soured the chest. Yet before the slimes could flee the carnage, Pierre relocked the chest. He sat by it then, guarding against any seepage from under the lid. And he listened for the master's call.

As he sat, he composed on his breath a secret anonymous missive to the very esteemed and revered Monsieur de Buffon. And later, when opportunity presented itself, Pierre copied out his letter, accusing his master of indolence & sloth & wasting his talents & spoiling the pictures destined for the *Natural History* in preparation across the sea, moreover accusing him of capricious and scandalous disregard of fishes & orchids, vermin & shadows & slaves, aspects of the world and its history to which a disinterested philosopher ought to pay attention. I slipped the wily Squint my hordings of coin, comprising three quarter bits, to see my letter safely on a ship to Buffon.

When no letter from France came for M'sieu by the next packet, I most cynically supposed myself abused. *Would I be caught and whipped with Stinger?* A boat came over, and again, and again. *Stretched till I pull apart?* Yet in time, the redoubtable Sage wrote my master an elegant reproof, entreating him to "take measures, Dear Sir!" Whether this ploy succeeded in saving the pictures, you may discover yourself. I am ignorant of their powdered fate, for I am here and they are where they are. Yet in time I will relate what I have heard. But e'en so much of my tale as I have told I pull ahead of myself in telling, as you have yet to hear of my schooling, the font of my learning, and thus, of my TESTAMENT.

## PART THE SECOND

### *The A, the B, the C of My Education*



Pierre Baptiste his master observed with the self-same scrutiny trained on the creatures. It did not escape M'sieu that his servant possessed CAPABILITIES BEYOND HIS STATION. Pierre was not constrained to speak the patois but spoke the master's language as well as he, and remembered as well the names of fauna and flora. I disguised my facility by affecting a blithe ignorance, for fear the master would suppose I had forgotten my place, yet his suspicion dogged me.

"Goody," he once inquired, "how came you to speak so learned a tongue?"

"I am a simple fellow with a pattern to follow," I avowed.

"And what habits of mine may he imitate next?" mused M'sieu, who brooded on the question of my abilities. He had directed a servant teach a hound to gigue on its hind legs. In like spirit had M'sieu seized the notion of having me taught to read and cipher. I began taking lessons with his son and heir, Pamphile, and the mixed-blood whelps M'sieu had got when drunk, whom he hoped to help to a useful place in his service.

Now I did not at first take to EDUCATION, for it meant leaving the protection of my master's presence. This I was reluctant to do. Though he be demanding and terrible-tempered, his body servant did not have to break his back with field-work. I preened myself on the variety of my chores: finding the master in picturesque vantage; mixing his colors; snaring specimens then strangling them with silken thread so as not to bruise or muss them; arranging the corpses to appear undisturbed, in their accustomed settings; running back to the kitchen to fetch my master's dinner upon hearing the midday gong; trotting after his horse like a pack horse myself, sacks & cases & easels slung about my person.

Now, a slave is not reared to look forward. Indeed, Pierre were wont to look back, in fear his pants would be taken, he must gangle in a smock again. Above all other considerations I did not wish to be returned to my childhood duty, the chasing and killing of rats, though once I had relished it. For each rat a child brought before Old Mistress—the first one, haughty, stern, and pious—he was awarded a credit. She measured the creature, nose to tail, then entered the credit in a book she kept in her pocket. When the child had brought her so many rats, she would give him a marble, a crystalline sphere with a colored tissue suspended in it, like a wounded eye. While I had earned bloody points toward marbles, choking rats with a forked stick, Pamphile and the far-rago of light-skinned brats had been squirming in hard chairs, blabbing their lessons from their hornbooks. The priest—not Père Gouy, who came out later, but the first I knew, a thin, frail man—taught an alphabetic catechism, fluting the names of marks he drew in charcoal on a board. (This was before his complexion turned yellow, and he died of flux.) The murmur of children naming their letters floated out the window. I peeked through the louvers of the shutters only to flee the boards and blab, for on the whole, in those salad days, I preferred killing rats.

Yet I waxed keenly curious about the HOUSE, which I had never been inside. The whitewashed stone building floated in the conjure-mist of fitful sleep. In reveries I wandered through in flower-broidered breeches, like a white boy, though in the conjure house the whites slept in hammocks as we did. In the world of natural light I had seen through open doors the wooden floors of the whites' house, yet I had not stood on them; my conjure planks were soft to the foot as soil. I could not conjure curtains, nor candlesticks, nor plate. Some of us slaves had stools in our kennels, even chairs, though without arms. None of us had tables, nor even tabourets; I did not yet know these furnishings existed. Alas, though I was to be educated, I was not allowed to indulge my curiosity in the matter of the house, viz., to sit with the others inside; I was directed to a seat on the ground outside the windows of the blue room. From there I crept forward and peered between the louvers, craning my neck to see the paradisickal ceiling, the gardens on the walls, the bright wood table at which Pamphile did his lessons, the elbow chair with flowered satin cushions in which the scion sat, and the looking glass on the wall, that made another world beyond the apparent one, and gave me back my round amazed eye, which I did not at first recognize between two louver slats.

At first, I was puzzled by lessons that bored Pamphile and his mixed-blood brethren, squirming on benches brought in from the yard. The wan, fussy governor Modeste Devere, who had taken the place of the priest, did not address me, nor hear my lessons, nor furnish me a hornbook, yet still I learned, for I wrote my letters and sums in the dust and corrected myself.

I did grasp the elements of instruction very much quicker than the privileged youths with their hornbooks, and a very good thing this was for me. Though I had been picked out to learn, my parsimonious master did not look to waste my training as a body servant, so, even while I absorbed instruction, I waited on my

master's one legitimate son. I must leave my seat to fetch him a drink; I must carry his books. When the hours of instruction were complete, I must polish his boots and his buttons and take his linen to the washerwoman, then clean his musket. Pamphile would elaborate my duties, viz., he would lie on his back while I dropped some dainty foodstuffs in his maw. But when his father heard of this from his new young wife, who thought it droll, M'sieu wore out his son himself.

"We will have no epicene Nero here," said M'sieu.

The son resented this comeuppance for as long as he remembered it. He had been accustomed to have his way and was petulant when he could not. His mother, Old Mistress, she of the rats, had doted on him above any other creature or thing, including her rosary, which she had carried always in her hands, praying to leave "this dreadful isle" and return to La Belle France.

Now when Pamphile's father whipped him, the boy evoked his pious mother's memory, saying his father's new young wife had turned M'sieu's head with mixed-blood ways, M'sieu had forgotten he was white, and sided with the blacks, whereupon M'sieu beat his son the harder, though he did not break the skin, nor even raise a welt, but only made a lot of noise, to advertise the punishment and humiliate the brazen boy.

I indulged no fancy Second Madame be in league with us full-bloods. Since her arrival, rheumy old chattel-folk minded rat traps to earn their keep; we children languished in the kitchen waving flies from the pots; alas, the custom of doling out marbles had abated with the custom of measuring rats, and who to blame but Second Madame?

Yet though Pamphile cried out against his stepmother, he bore me no grudge. He was an impulsive boy, an impetuous, moody, willful one, but his rages were less fearsome than those of his father, his calculations less exigent. In uncharitable moments, I judged the boy weak, & self-indulgent, & irresponsible, & indeed,

useless, yet I must own he helped me. When he saw I meant to learn, though I started with the youngest brats, he commenced a sulky supervision, drilling me to improve my knowledge of the numerals and letters, commanding me to write each one in the dust with my stick. To indulge his humor, I feigned ignorance of what I already knew.

"Goody, you fool! The mount, the mount! Cross—no! *Up* then *down* then *cross*—oh, I will make it for you once again; you will learn, damn creature!" he said, cracking me in the head with the hornbook, "or I shall never sail for France."

Oh, there a glimpse into the coils! Yet I dare not demonstrate too facile an apprehension, so I continued to feign intractable stupidity, suffering my vexed tutor beat the letters and numbers into my head, one by one, in the miserable chinks of his very short attention. By a judicious display of loutish amazement, I drew him out on the subject of his own great learning, and heard what books he had studied to acquire his scant proficiencies in Latin, in geometry, in history, Greek, in geography and in all manner of philosophy, both physical and metaphysical. In this way I formed a clear notion what curriculum the great whites studied to master the world, though I did not see that Latin played much part in the elaborate conquest that preoccupied Pamphile, viz., to wink and leer at the serving wenches, seducing them from their duties.

The number and intricacy of my own ruses could not completely disguise my aptitudes; I was unmasked altogether when Pamphile came out to teach me the letter *Y* and found me engrossed in a treatise I was composing in the dust, an inquiry into a moral question that had arisen whilst I drowsed through the droning lessons Modeste Devere was conducting inside.

From my vantage point outside the house I had observed a diligent swarm of bees and noticed within it the CURIOUS PARASITE, which I call CHANGELING. Now as the morning sun

climbed the hill of heaven, pale green eggs in the tufts of grass did burst in the gathering heat, and from these eggs there crawled some yellow-and-black-striped wormlets, with sacklike bodies and many hundreds of paws. Hunching and squirming, the creatures contrived to lug themselves over ground, up stalk or vine, to lurk in the cavities of orchids, to feign the appearance of bees drinking nectar. And the purpose of this ruse, though obscure at first, soon enough became manifest. Soon enough my sidelong watch disclosed some changelings, clinging with grains of pollen to bees' hindmost legs, the bees thus freighted but straining progress.

The hive toward which the bees labored had been constructed against the louvers of a shutter in the green room. Upon remarking this, M'sieu instructed the schoolmaster repair thereto with his charges, to watch through the slats the bees that grumbled and drudged in the hive. As the squeamy bright brats balked at exposing their tender hides to the assaults of aroused bees, I was urged to be bold with my tough dark hide. So, holding my fingers in front of my eyes, to make a palisade with a sighting slit, I sacrificed hands and forearms for the sake of vision.

Between a number of stings, I was able to remark not only the diligent labors of the bees, but a number of changelings attentively succored with the bees' queens and grubs. So drawn was my attention to the changelings cradled in the nurseries of the comb, I did not remark the maps and books that complemented the furnishings of M'sieu's best room. 'Twas my first visit, indeed, inside the house, that had loomed so large in my dreams, but I was intent on calming myself, lest I reveal my QUICKNESS IN DISCOVERING, as I believed I had, A CREATURE NOT PREVIOUSLY KNOWN, the one M'sieu was to submit to Buffon in the name *Metamorphosa dufayensis*, Pierre having contrived to credit the master's vanity, that the servant's discovery might in this guise survive in the archive of learning. (True, I was never

acknowledged a collaborator of the noble Intendant of the King's Garden, Count of Buffon and Sage of Montbard, yet neither was Dufay. Buffon does not always acknowledge.)

Weeks after taking the indoor louver, or sectional, view, peering as was my wont at the papery hive from my seat of outdoor learning, I was given to remark, on the verge of the rainy season, a number of needle-ish creatures drawing themselves through ruinous holes in the hive, shuddering and unrolling the hair-thin organs that trembled on their heads as the halos of angels in desperate prayer, their quivering wings yet folded. The creatures did scrub these wings with their legs, then pass their legs through their mouths repeatedly, thus, amidst their travail, enjoying a fine honey dinner.

Some were taken by birds before their wings, all clean, had flared, but others embarked on a dainty debauch of dipping and soaring. All summer long, they fluttered across the parterres and dallied along the allées. Then, pirouetting on gusts, they beat their flimsy wings more ardently as the rainy season approached, which would shred their wings and drown the creatures in down-pour. Ah, the needles were born but to couple and perish, a lamentable short ballet, alas!

Now I had wheedled into complicity the lass we called Marie-Jeanne, that the white men called Full-Bags (though not in front of their wives), a serving girl charged with making tidy, a task which must bring her smack up against the hivey shutter, though not for long. She was wary of the bees, yet she was feisty and game, for she thought me a very nice boy and was impressed with my learning. So she would aid me by some assiduous observations if my duties took me on an errand for Pamphile or if I must take for my dinner when offered the crumbs he dropped.

I fitted her hands with raggy bandages and taught her to peer through a finger-slit. Between us we ascertained the bees' comb was wracked with needle-bore. The rain-soaked hungry bees

would die in droves! Thus was the needles' double nature disclosed, their cover thrown off! Thus were the pillaging brigands indicted, nay, convicted! Thus did I contemplate the delicate imbalance, the disorder of the order of the world, even as I learned my sums and letters.

It did not escape me, the analogy borne by this paradox to our plantation worked by servants and slaves. Many masters of whom I had heard might, with a less-than-flattering reversal of gender, be compared to the bees' queens, in their continuous and cosseted begetting; our M'sieu were a proper changeling. His principal employment swung between intemperate devastation of others' useful lives and the pursuit, through his art, of universal knowledge. Yet though his laurels were earned at slave expense, I could not whole-heartedly wish him ill.

Did I not possess some traits of a changeling myself? Though I be full-blood, hence black, and not mulatto, not quarteron, nor marabou, nor sacatra, nor even sang-melé, as had been rumored Young Mistress were, concealing the one black part in the one-hundred-and-twenty-seven white parts, yet I had already begun to hope I might make myself so useful, in my diligence on Master's behalf, I might one day be manumitted, with some small property, to live a free man, with a garden and cow and a mortgage for my person I could pay with my time. In this modest desire I plotted to infiltrate the "hive" of those whom I resembled in certain traits—if not in hue, then in learning—to ignore, mayhap wrack, the many compartments into which their society had been divided. So be it! Some unfortunate souls, like the laboring bees, are doomed their entire lives to toil, while others, queens or drones, are free to indulge some whims! And changelings burrow to the heart of lord-and-lady-over-all! Who would not choose to be fortunate? So I thought in those gone days.

I was but twelve years old, my conjectures half-formed; yet the very act of meditation on the notion of justice would have got me

flogged, had Pamphile, upon discovering my writing, been curious enough to read what I had written. It did not occur to him a poor black slave, who took so long to learn his *A*, his *B*, his *C*, might write a treatise in dust from which a white might learn, even the depth of insubordination with which he must contend. I moved to rub out what I had written directly I remarked my young master's spread shadow legs, swaggering back on their heels, fell across my periods. So he read aloud but a phrase, "useful lives and creation of beauty," and the pretension to homily amused him. He did not beat me for deceiving him, but whooped in boyish joy. He slapped me on the back and vowed I would have a fine supper that night. So instead of buttermilk and cornbread, he gave me meat of a bird he had shot. Yet I was not pleased, but fearful, for I did not know what would become of me.

The enterprise of my education M'sieu had undertaken in defiance of the planters roundabout, who swore into their rum he would instill in me tastes at odds with my station. They said he should hire a small white or train a very high yellow, lest the laboring blacks, from the conjunction of my color & my privilege, suppose their own merits deserved elevation. His neighbors reminded him of certain laws. M'sieu persevered with me partly in spite of these friends, for he did not care for their condescension; partly in spite of the law, which he said had no doubt been promulgated by brothers of those who farmed the taxes; partly to satisfy at once his curiosity & his vanity, to see if a full-blood would learn, and he could have me taught; partly to win respite from his stewardship without incurring the expense of hiring or purchasing a clerk. He loathed the small whites, and with them mulattos, including his offspring, who gave themselves airs. All his intentions floated as congealing fat to the surface of broth when Pamphile reported my schooling be complete: I could read, write, and cipher full as well as half the whites in the islands.

## THE A, THE B, THE C OF MY EDUCATION

Then directly Pamphile took ship for France, while I was charged to sit at a slant-topped desk in the office & waiting room to make fair copies of letters, orders, & bills and to keep the journal & ledger of the plantation, recording its profit & loss, having been led, stumbling and gawking, past the turkey rugs & gilded hangings, the cabinet inlaid with ivory and the peacocks & pagodas on the green-room walls. At the desk, in tempting proximity to piles of books and half-rolled maps of the world with its vasty seas, I was dipped at once, pen in ink-pot, into the BUSINESS OF THE PLANTATION.

So much to the factor and so to the dealer in slaves, so much for salted meat, so for salt herring (yet though the sea be full of fish). So much for damask, so for books, for linen, for nails, for corks & tinware & cordage, for rosin & glasses, pitch & tar & guns. All that spending and then the losses! Losses to rats and losses to blight! Losses to fire & storm! Losses to pilfering! Losses of shipping, foundering at sea! And losses of slaves, when a careless one was scalded in the trying works or a desperate one threw himself in the boiling 'lasses vat. Here in ciphers our hanging ourselves and poisoning ourselves to end our misery! And when the times were bad, M'sieu would cut the dole of grub, though the work could not slack. We were sickening and dying, then, punished with a vengeance for our mortality. Yet however a slave died, the investment must be written off.

If in so much loss a profit be turned, it were at dear cost, from a slavish perspective, but our perspective weighed naught in the balance with rum; molasses; and sugar, refined and raw. The receipts coming in served to stave off creditors, and from them rich white men lived well, both here and in France. All the rest were but inky numbers, black numbers, yes, black numbers crossing the page, loss to profit and profit to loss, lives disappearing while

numbers like ants crossed back and forth across the page, number-slaves at a master's bidding—ah, a master? The lord of the hand that guided mine, was he but in name my master? M'sieu came to seem but the occasion for little black numbers, moving about, making a pattern in the shape of which could be divined all the lofty purpose of fermenting yeast.

So it seemed to this poor slave, who did see in the growth of a tree from a sapling a movement toward light. Yet he did see in the growth of his master's enterprise but a stale accumulation, more land, more slaves, more horses, more debt, the latter piling up as a heap of midden outside a kitchen door. These scraps are all that remains of dinner, but what are they worth in themselves? For in them what is foul and noxious is bred, flies spring forth to buzz and plague us long after tasty morsels have been devoured.

Ah, but what of M'sieu's artistry? Did his drawings & paintings transcend the ferment of numbers? Or did he make them in default? For, distracted as he was, did not his drivers take advantage, and the factor in Saint-Domingue, and the captains of the ships? And the merchants in France? Did not their letters grow angrier? And ours to them? In these lights, the drawings must be entered on the debit side with the other losses which threatened to swamp the plantation enterprise. Yet midden is in the reckoning; sure to the flies the midden be the sacred ground of birth; each man—even a man in bondage—possesses his own perspective and sees what he sees. What Pierre Baptiste saw he kept to himself in those days.

M'sieu's father, who had long since died, had stipulated in his will the Anduves plantation be run by his sons, in a joint partnership, on a partable account, with the elder son, Alexandre Hippolyte, acting as agent with the merchants in Europe, the younger, Auguste Henri, going out to manage the plantations, for which he received one-third of all the net profits. Now the father

meant to ensure the prosperity of the younger, for he had left the bulk of the estate to the elder, yet he wished the younger might have a respectable living that would sustain him in the manner of a gentleman, that he might not fall into ruinous poverty & dependency, like the children's governor, Modeste Devere, that poor fifth son of negligent improvidence.

M'sieu did not mind his third of the profits, but he wished his brother might allow him to hire a steward, that M'sieu might retire to France, to live on his income in a comfortable manner, and put aside forever the noisome business of supervising blacks. Yet the plantation was profitable enough, and, inasmuch as Lord Alexandre Hippolyte got a thousand per annum clear, he would not agree to a change of the stewardship.

In desperation, M'sieu had commenced to set aside his third from the gross, rather than the net, that he might eventually buy his own plantation and hire a steward and live in France, on income that did not depend on his brother's good will. Because there were diversions to conceal, then, M'sieu had excellent reasons for encouraging frugality, though he could not easily persuade his wives or his children to stint on food or drink or clothing. He more easily imposed economies on his slaves, and was very exact in calculating rations & yardage. He avoided hiring men or women, free-black or yellow or white, but raised up his slaves despite the risks. Thus, Pierre Baptiste owed his perquisites to his master's concealments. And Pierre was never a fool! He did not hesitate to elevate certain prices and charges, at his master's bidding, and to stipulate phantom salaries, including his own, to conceal how much cream he skimmed off the milk. When Pierre was charged to draft a letter detailing how matters stood here in the islands, in the management of the plantation, he subtly and dexterously emphasized economy & vigilance & the difficulty of all the undertaking, so that M'sieu's—shall we say his independence?—was covered with a thick layer of prevarication, a gloss of

glittering, reflective mendacity. In this way Pierre earned his master's gratitude.

Did Pierre have a CONSCIENCE? Ah, it was not a white man's conscience—that Pierre could not afford. What hope had he but to augment his master's opportunities? For we slaves strangled cattle to eat, and said they had died of mosquitoes clogging their windpipes—as some did die—and sure we did not call it “theft,” nor drawing down from the rum vat, “pilfering.” A slave is a possession, as what he takes. How can chattel steal from itself? If I eat my master's beef, do I not improve his property in the flesh of my person?

In like manner, I will say my master but moved around the property that belonged in his family, as a man may move his family's furniture from room to room of the house. What difference to Pierre? This master, though frugal, were tolerable. Who would look to see him disgraced and recalled? No slave could relish the prospect of a slovenly steward augmenting his draw with one sot-tish paw, fondling wenches with the other. We bondsmen looked not to see the mill-house knee-deep in cattle dung, the coppers burned and filthy, the curing-house pots overflowed and crusted, the cane fields choked with weeds. For an overseer little inclined to preserve his master's property would stint as well on planting corn; the mules and the stock would starve, the slaves languish. A greedy, short-sighted steward would confiscate our hogs and fowl, give us no new clothes nor salt for what food we got. We had heard of it happening, and some of us had seen it. Oh, when an interested master left his place to indifferent oversight, the plantation could founder, the slaves still alive be sold to a brute or a pauper.

Why should Pierre, or any bonded man in these islands, care about lining a master's pocket in France? Alexandre Hippolyte sent dirty linen for our women to wash, so we knew his smell, but we had never seen his person. Why would we tattle if the younger

brother, our master in more than small clothes, drank some wine that Duke Fine-Linen-Over-the-Sea had sent round-trip in the belly of a ship to age? Pierre would not tell, but wrote to elder brother for M'sieu, "The culprit like be some disgruntled hand we look to catch and whip."

Pierre Baptiste, a prudent man, inspected each notion from every angle; he feared the success of his master's plan to hire an overseer; he feared its ignominious failure; yet Pierre contented himself with dropping a word in the ears of the hands. They would be well advised to sabotage the profits, though not too greatly, by a leisurely disregard of rats in the stores, by setting the odd fire, or by spoiling with piss a vat or two of rum. Pierre all the while curried favor with his pen.

In making himself more and more useful, Pierre Baptiste was entrusted to ever more DELICATE DUTIES. He was permitted to draft in M'sieu's name the correspondence with Buffon in which observations and speculations were transmitted, with the very best drawings for engraving. This correspondence he did very much embellish, to M'sieu's great glory, and thus Dufay and Buffon were both unbeknown to themselves in Pierre Baptiste's debt. That one did delight in the elegant, revealing phrase! If you chance to have subscribed for the *Histoire Naturelle*, and have been privileged to read of the "red-and-green throat of the small lizard, puffing like a dropped lady's handkerchief," or of "fishes a garden of flesh in our waters," you will know these locutions first danced from the pen of Pierre Baptiste, though not, to be sure, on his own authority.

To assert authority—this is precisely what a bondsman never may do, for he be deemed a pissant number, a cipher moved from column to column on the great white page with never a qualm for the wish of the number. Pierre Baptiste knew what risks he could take. Describing the flora and the fauna from the slant-topped

desk, he was content to savor the pleasure of composition without the renown of authority, for this in itself was more glory than he had yet dreamed—he who had supposed, before he served in the big house, the whites slept in their fine brocades in the same hammocks as we!

For his part, M'sieu undertook longer and longer excursions to more and more remote parts of our isle, and was even rowed in boats, though he could not swim and had not ceased to hate the sea with its monotonous tides and dank & perilous depths. Pierre at the ledger was now frequently alone in the office for hours, yet he finished his work with ever greater alacrity. Once he might have whiled away the idle time in jumping out windows to distract boys on errands for a stealthy game of marbles. He might have gossiped with footmen blacking boots or chatted up the wenches shelling peas. He might have gazed out at the busy work of the estate, imagining a sovereignty he would never possess. Yet, though he be young, he had learned much more than he wanted of the business he surveyed. Having written so many LOSSES in the books, he did not care to gaze at bare-backed field hands hoeing and picking, cutting and stripping and bundling cane beneath the lash, singing their all-too-regular song, the hounds licking sweat from the backs of their legs. Pierre saw his brothers already bones, strung on handles to be rattled for a dance. Yes, Pierre saw skeletons grubbing in the carries, though these were men who ate well enough.

He particularly loathed the slow, wet months of the year, while the cane is growing to its full height, ripening from a grass-green color to deepest popinjay, for then the hands must battle the blood-red earth itself, working the fallow resting fields. Then the terrible rise and fall of picks, of hoes, in time, did seem to turn the very ground that reeled and shook in the heat, as the cattle turned the mill that crushed the cane when harvest began in drier months. Pierre had seen a mill-feeder catch'd by a finger between

the turning mills he fed, his whole body drawn in after, to be squeezed to pulp. And all the while the oxen plodded round and round, round and round, wearing a path in the earth, the juice dripped, drop by bloody drop, into the cistern. The crushed feeder's body fat was skimmed off the tops of the boiling juices in the coppers, with bits of his bone & skin & guts, as dross. Another feeder had already stepped into the crushed one's place. Is it any wonder Pierre loathed the languorous, fiery substance that dripped from the still? Is it any wonder he choked when the whites spoke of "anthropophagi" in Africa, claiming we had eaten the flesh of our brothers and deserved for our baseness to suffer as slaves? Pierre had puked when he smelled the fires, the burning sugar, puked again at the sight of the muscovado, the golden brown sugar knocked in loaves from curing pots, like boiled brains from a human skull, puked again at the sight of the clay-cured white stuff, phantom of cane. *Sweets are Death*, he said to himself, *Give me salt*, the sweat of life, though he did not yearn to be sweating once again in the carries. Yet, though a life be living death, still it is all a man may have. It is itself and no other thing till it is burned to what it is not, to death, white death, and oh, even then, the motto floated in Pierre's nose like the smell of burning sugar, *Death to whites*.

On the occasional amble to the waterfront to survey the dock-side bustle, I did count in a state of fascinated fear the hogsheads of sugar, molasses, & rum, rolled from the warehouse into the boats to be rowed under guard to the port of Saint-Domingue, there to be loaded in ships and sent to Europe. I knew why M'sieu imported barrels of dried salt fish. The hands were too exhausted from work in the fields to catch their dinner. The irony of calico & bluecloth imported to cover our nakedness, that our master might boast he treated us as men, not beasts! Oh, there were much that a man who had finished the counting might brood on, much he might worry between his lengthening teeth,

be he given to rumination. Yet I would be assigned more work, mayhap less to my liking, were it reported I be idle; so in slack hours Pierre feigned diligence at his desk. The ledger open, his ear pricked to footfall, a page of fool's cap ready to cover his reading, Pierre embarked on the curriculum for mastering the world that he had heard as he scratched his *A*, his *B*, his *C* in the dust. Yes, once Pierre had found his place in the world on maps, losing himself in the vast sea-stretch separating SAINT-MICHEL from GUINÉE, he began to read his master's books. So he became a man of letters; all on his own, he came to the end of his alphabet.

## PART THE THIRD

### *Shadow Histoire*



PIERRE READ Latin and Greek, languages he had learned from Pamphile's errors, though not to perfection. Walking, then trotting, then roughly cantering, Pierre rode bareback through Caesar's commentaries on the Gallic wars; through Pericles; through Plato; Aristotle, Sophides, Virgil, Cicero, Horace, Tacitus, Veratius Aurelius. Then, reading in the latter-day tongue, Pascal and Nerf, Montaigne, La Mettrie, Pintal, Descartes; the Englishman, Newton, in the translation of Buffon; Fénelon, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, and various compendia, viz., of Bossuet, Diderot, and, of course, Buffon. Through DILIGENT APPLICATION Pierre became conversant with scriptures as with satires; with comedies, tragedies, sermons & axioms; anatomies & essays; commentaries, letters & fables; chronicles & epics & herbals & the frail fancytales of Madame de Larme and her ilk. And much of what he read he did not understand; and much he did. And his head became so stuffed with notions, he found they were spilling into oblivion; he must needs write them down, to keep and hold, but he had no commonplace book.

## SHADOW HISTOIRE

Soon, then, I inveigled the kitchen help to steam tea packets over the stew pots so I could have the labels. The grumbling boss-grudge, Vérité, who had come to queen the kitchen, scowled me out the door, did she catch me coaxing wenches. Yet I prevailed through dogged persistence, for I would have the obverse of the labels on which to copy certain sentiments from the books I read—words I wished to secure, for remembrance or effect, in a talisman pouch I carried in my bosom, with relicts of my lineage.

So the noble heart cracks in vain, men choose for honor when they cannot choose for love.

—Egregon in Tontine's *Polyphon*

The path of faith is a thread strung over a chasm of doubt.

—Nerf

The Father and Creator, All-Powerful, All-Understanding, Eternal, Infinite, Wonderful and Glorious—the eye of an angel is not bright enough to contemplate Him, nor the tongue of an angel golden enough to name Him. And yet He Cares for the least of His creatures as the tenderest mother her babes, sending Death to quiet suffering. And our suffering? If we did not suffer, would we know we lived?

—Aiguillard Rostant

I pant, I rage, I quiver, I sweat—in short, I desire, and my desire has reduced me to a beast, nay, elevated me to an angel, for I cannot believe my passion is base.

—La Duchesse d'Espoir  
in Madame de Larme's *Romance of Desire*

The Word is a fire and its keeper is not the mouth but the heart.

—Pintal

Of all these tidbits none seemed nobler, nor more inspiring, nor more sublimely elegant, than passages of our exalted correspondent, M. de Buffon:

Though the works of the Creator are all in themselves equally perfect, the animal is, according to our perception, the most complete work of Nature, and man is Nature's masterwork.

—*A Comparison of Animals and Vegetables*

Man alone constitutes a class apart, from which one must descend through an unimaginably vast expanse of space, to reach the animals.

—*On the Sense of Sight*

How these words pierced the heart of a slave, whose every impulse and perception told him he was as quick and as virtuous, as complete a work of intricate cunning, as his master, yet who knew himself counted on the estate books as chattel, enrolled with horses, chicken, and pigs! At best, as real property!

To avenge my degradation, I must confess, I defiled the chastity of many a volume, the pages of which had not been cut, but I did ravage with pains, for I prided myself on civility. Dear Reader, you may allow I was taking seigneurial rights in defiling these books, stealing perquisites from the master. I confess it was so. Shamelessly I quaffed the liquor from the phials, his books, the quintessence of his people's genius! Yet what I took were little enough of all my master had, and, like the bread and wine of Baucis and Philemon, remained for him to take again. Indeed, the general stock of learning were not depleted by my taking, but rose! Consider too the son, Pamphile, whom his father's economies scarcely touched, this silver-gilt scion with three pair of breeches, & shoes that fit, & his own handkerchief, nicely worked, & a pony with a braided tail, & a little chest of leaden soldiers—

had not this boy tried to steal what little I had, the one small memento of the very great genius of my kind? I mean my talisman pouch.

MY TALISMAN was a curiously wrought bag, nicely woven of tough and prickly fibers not of these islands, very likely from a vine or a pod or the hull of a nut or seed of the forest from which my mother was taken. In it were relicts of mysterious provenance: some teeth of a very small creature, not so large as a mouse, but mouselike; the beaks & claws & tiny bones of several birds, contained in the case of a sizable beetle, from which the creature had drilled an exit, as I have seen these creatures do, this exit stoppered with a sliver of cork. And also, within that same beetle's case, what I took for a lizard's tongue; and in the pouch, though not in the case, a white feather of a hen or pigeon; some very small, very smooth red and black stones, as from a river bed; a stick of cinnamon, broken in two, and seven cloves. Petals of a white flower, dried brown; skin of a snake, rolled and tied; five kernels of maize; a pumpkin seed; a fish hook carved of bone; garlic skins; cumin seed; pepper corns; a rag doll smaller than my smallest finger; a dead palmetto bug; a very small, light, white cylinder of paper, wrapped round and nearly covered with black thread; bits of crumbling earthlike matter with a pungent odor; a shard of glass, such as I have seen others use, holding it to water to see the homeland in Guinée.

It needs no water-glass return-gaze to see the girl, MY MOTHER, hanging back in dappled shade, a younger daughter of scant importance in an uncle's household, possessing little beyond her body save the pouch which her mother had hung around her neck on the eve of her departure for her uncle's house with a basket of cola nuts balanced on her head. She had rarely been given anything anyone else wanted, yet she had what she needed. She

followed the ox that pulled the plow, followed the cattle her uncle kept, followed the lion and the dog-cat, picking up bits of their dung to keep about her the acrid smells for protection.

It needs no water-glass to see her, pounding yam harder than her sisters. Did I but close my eyes, I conjured them on the day of the night they were captured, heard the gales of hearty laughter that broke the rhythm of the pounding song, the thumping of strong young girls at their mortars. One breaks into dance; another leaves her pestle to fetch back a toddler who crawls into underbrush at the edge of a forest where anyone might be lurking, counting on his fingers the number of houses, and, from the number of mortars, the number of people who eat there, guessing how many are men, who might resist the raid on the pounder-girls' village, the return of the lurker by night with his fellows to fire the thatch.

Clutching her talisman pouch she was traded and traded again, bought and sold and bought and sold, until sold to the whites who brought her over the sea to sell her and buy and sell her again, men as white as the clay of the masks the men of the Fombé wear when they dance to honor the ancestors, running back from the river into the forest, tossing food to uncles' uncles who have been furnished with too few provisions for the journey to the other world, so loiter and dawdle in this one, making mischief until they are fed. Bought and sold and bought and sold—should anyone, least of all Pierre Baptiste, doubt that men's greed smells more pungent than the excrement of beasts?

Now my mother's name was MARIE MANDILÉ-BA—Little Girl, the whites made so familiar to call her, yet though they had given her a grand name, Ernani, of a tragical heroine, that they might smirk at the irony thereof. And Dufay took her, my mother, Marie Mandilé-Ba, took her, nay, dragged her to auction. And why? Because she, who had served him well, no longer earned her keep.

They had given her old shoes; her feet slid back and forth; she slipped on a banana peel; her arm broke and was improperly set by Captain Squint, to save the expense of a surgeon. Her driver, Fanfaron, called Catiline, covered her lagging in the fields, but there was no hiding her bent clumsiness when the gang fell behind, inviting the scrutiny of Captain Squint, who petitioned to move her to the house, where First Mistress deemed her crooked arm too unsightly to live with.

"Sell her," she muttered, clicking her rosary, *France! France! Return to France!*

The master refused then relented, on grounds my mother was costing too much. So my father, Jolicoeur, called Juba, who lived abroad, on another plantation, stole in by night in his hollow-log canoe to find his Marie Mandilé-Ba gone. Some say Jolicoeur hung himself, others he simply stopped coming by, still others he was sold himself. Why was I, a nursing babe, not sold with Ernani? Ah! M'sieu was too parsimonious to give up the stock.

My mother wept most piteously as I was pulled from her palm-oiled breast. It needs no water-glass to see her tears! Already planters who could afford no better peered nervously into her mouth, anxiously testing her remaining good joints. I have often prayed she was sold to one who could feed her all the year.

The TALISMAN BAG played a part in the service of the several gods of my mother's people, whose names and powers Marie Mandilé-Ba was saving to tell me (along with my true name, her mother's brother's name) when my voice had changed. Alas! She was not to hear me speak as a man. I know little of the kin who may be calling from across vast stretches of sea. Fombé. I am of the Fombé. My people were different from those of the other bondsmen on the place, many of them Oro. Ernani was unable to talk to these Oro until she had learned the patois. She had no one to talk to in her own tongue, for Jolicoeur did not speak it, but

had wooed her with smiles and gifts. Nor was she able to teach it to me, for she was sold before I had been weaned. Yet the reward she had most looked for was the name-gift she would make upon my coming of age.

Had she known she would be sold so soon, she would not have let old Rose choose my first name, when I had lived but a day past the peril of ninth-day fits. 'Twas Rose who named me Pierre Baptiste, after a white babe who had died, so the mistress would look on me kindly, yet Rose believed my mother would name me my true name later. Nobody thought I would grow to a man with the white boy's name; old mistress had said, it were touching and loyal, I had been given her son's name, yet I could only keep it till another white boy be born, he be given it; then I should be called Cato or Lucius. Yet she died before she could give her husband this new boy. And the young mistress would not name her children any names the old one had fancied; even so, her womb proved barren. I kept the name of the dead white boy, though the whites called me Goody, believing me docile and subservient. I was entered on the books as Lucius and never learned the name my mother had been saving to give me.

"Go among the trees," said Rose. "Sit on the ground in the dark and listen to merrywings. From within the buzz a path will open; from between the isle-lapping waves will walk your mother. She will sit behind you. She will speak for your ears, and only for yours. She will tell you all she could not while she was here."

"Is she dead then? I do not believe you. How came you by my mother's secrets? If she visits, then why has she not come to me?"

"Go among the trees," said Rose. "I will show you where, but you must never look around. You must never try to see her face, or reach to hold her, for if you do, she will vanish. She will not return."

A voice spoke in the dark from among the trees. I did not look around. "Rose, it is you," I said, when the voice at my ear said my name, but the voice did not acknowledge. "Rose? Rose?" If Rose made MY MOTHER'S HISTOIRE, then it be an Oro story, or Rose's story, or Rose's mother's. Yet if it is, then so be it. The story I heard from among the trees is what I have of my mother, which I shall presently relate, how she was stolen from her uncle's house by raiders attired as ghosts, with clay cracking on their faces.

"We knew they were Gon. The Fombé ghosts are blue," said my mother, who was only a voice, smoke in my ear. "Blue," she said, "with faces of smoke. For sure these were men wearing smoke-masks, and wreathed in smoke. I had not yet bled; I am not even sure I had my second teeth. But I knew those men were Gon. I knew from the long red baskets dangling between their thighs. They were men of the Gon, looking for women to work in their fields.

"Fire woke us. Coughing and crying, we stumbled from the house. The Gon killed my uncle and took his wife and my sister and me, and my two brothers who had not yet been given names, and three very young cousins, two boys and a girl, who had not yet gone to my aunt's eldest brother. My aunt's younger brothers were visiting us, but they had gone hunting; they could not help to fight off the raiders who had found a weak spot in the wall of saplings around the yard.

"So they caught us as we stumbled out from under our burning roof. At first my aunt thought the ghosts were her younger brothers, killed on the trail, and she shook her fists at them. 'You big boys had to sally forth by yourselves. You never liked my husband; you couldn't wait for him. In so great a hurry to try out your arrows, you would not stop to place the stones for the hearth where I wanted them, further from the wall. Now what disaster!'

“But the ghosts were Gon. They fired all the buildings in our yard, then bound our wrists and marched us away in a line, with our household goods and the grain we had threshed. When my aunt’s brothers returned from the hunt, did they find but ashes? The sour smell of smoke drifting on the wind? A cold trail of broken twigs leading across two rivers toward the Gon country . . . ?

“I never saw any member of my uncle’s household again, nor did I ever again see my mother and father, who lived a day’s walk away on the other side of the camp where all my people lived together when there was more than enough to eat. I dwelt among the Gon through clearing season, through planting season, through harvest season, sleeping curled against a silo where they stored the dung of their cattle to work into the soil of their gardens. The warm dung heated the mud of the silo wall, and I curled around the silo like a wife around her husband’s back when he has had all he wants of her. Though I was not yet old enough to marry, the men of the place bothered me, and bothered me, and used me, and the boys too. I hugged the silo wall and cried myself to sleep at night. By day the women watched for my blood, for whatever the men did, I was still a virgin till it came. But the Gon women did not prepare a bleeding house for me, as my aunt would have. No, they meant to sell me as a virgin when I ripened.

“I vowed to conceal my blood when it came. I would bear a child of the Gon and marry among them, so they would not sell me to people stranger than they who lived further away. When the blood came, I was in the garden, bending and bending to harvest yams. A Gon girl saw blood on my legs and cried out, and the Gon sold me for salt.

“They tied my arms behind my back, and they tied a rope around my neck, and they led me like a calf along the river—I counted four bends—then they turned away from the river, and followed an ancient track through the forest, chopping at vines as they passed. They could not continue on the river path, they

explained but poorly in the Fombé tongue. They feared I would cry out when the caravan went by the camps of the N'H'ou-la, and beg them to save me, though N'H'ou-la stink of fish. So I knew they had not gone far past the river; still I hoped to return to my people, who trade with the N'H'ou-la.

"But when the caravan came out of the forest, after five days' march, it was to another river. And the N'H'ou-la to whom the Gon sold me spoke with an accent I could not understand, though they scarred their bodies in the N'H'ou-la way. They were fatter and more arrogant than the N'H'ou-la I had known. The fish were different; I liked not the taste, but it mattered not. They did not keep me long but traded me to men in odd flat boats that were carried downstream on a strong, fast current. Then the boatmen poled them up another, narrower, yellower river. And I was traded, again for salt, which 'twas said the N'H'ou-la would trade for more slaves to buy more salt!

"All this trading, back and forth, back and forth—like the crazy old man of my mother's village who made a trough in the earth from walking back and forth, back and forth.

"The boat men traded me to the Perg, for nine strings of beads and a bolt of cloth, and the Perg hoisted me onto a monstrous humpback beast where I hung with jars of palm-oil and wine. And I was carried from waterhole to waterhole across an expanse of parched earth, ghosts shimmering before me in the sun. They had not covered me, so the sun burned me, and my skin blistered, and I wept as I tossed in the feverish heat, wrapped in a thick blanket so I would live long enough to sell.

"Though I was weary, I did not shut my eyes, for everything around me was strange, the boys with feathers in their hair, like girls, the humpy beasts that stamped their great round hooves and swished their skinny tails at flies. The women who dressed in tents. The blue stripes on the faces of people and the hours they spent in the early evening outlining each other's eyes with a

murky substance so black that it made the whites of their eyes burn from their faces like sudden torches in a moonless night.

“Though I might never see my family again or hear the language of my people, I thought I could live among these blue-faced ones. I would learn to milk the she-hump-beasts. I would let the Perg pierce my nose and ears. I would learn to walk in a tent without stepping on its edges. I would learn Perg dances, and outline my eyes, and pick out men, rather than waiting to be picked. Indeed, I had smiled on one, who had smiled at me as I gathered dung for a fire. Perhaps if I bore him, or another man, a child, a son, the man would keep me. The Perg would not sell me further from home, to people stranger than they.

“The Perg carried me into a walled town, with tall towers of mud, where I was displayed in the marketplace with hump-beast-hide bags the Perg had made to sell in the great open square, among people who dressed like the blue ones, but were paler and did not paint themselves. Beneath the sun’s relentless glare, I was jammed into a wooden pen with other captives, and fattened on millet, and bowed down with many pounds-weight of stone, swinging on a yoke from my neck. So many of us, crowded together, rubbed raw against our fellows and against the boards, fainting and dying and reviving back again! At last I was traded for guns to men paler still, some of whose bodies were covered in silvery scales, like fishes’. They smelled like their own dung, for they did not wash themselves after they shat; they ate with both hands, and so thought nothing of confining us with our own excrement.

“The one who bought me—for bars of copper and for brandy—was fat and greasy white, blinking and squinting in the sun like a termite queen. He wore monstrous pantaloons that billowed over his living human stool, a servant who crouched on all fours so the master’s silken fancies would not touch soil. More slaveys swung broad-leaved branches over his head to keep off the

flies. And he smirked from under his beetle's shiny skull at caravans of skeletons, tied together by a cord through their ears, stumbling beneath a lash, falling against one another as they cried out for water. So many dead had been thrown into the bush that the sated dog-cats ignored the feast. While a slavey swung a pomander, the termite "king" pinched his nose and chewed on a leaf that darkens the teeth, as if blood had dried on them. And the gang of skeletons who still walked and breathed moaned in terror on the shore, as I did, upon seeing for the first time the vast-stretching sea. They clutched each other's shoulders, and some tried to run away, tearing their own ears and the ears of others. Then they were all flogged, for mutilating themselves and lowering the prices they would fetch. Not long after, I, too, crossed the sea, trembling and sweating, with a rope through my ankles and another through my ears, so it hurt me too much to eat. M'sieu bought me, for rum and a bill of credit, in the market of Saint-Domingue. And the rest of my life until Dufay again sold me you can see all around you, my son. Alas, you bear it in your bones."

Some time after Dufay sold my mother, when I was but a kid in the yard, the lordling Pamphile put out his hand and wagged his fingers, as at a dog, to make me give him the pouch. He had observed the birds come closer when I was about; he had divined my "powers" resided in the crumbling collection of relicts sequestered in the bag. He wished to examine my jujus, but I hung back, and sidled behind a tree, and regarded him warily. So I have been told.

He stamped his foot. "Come, Boy! Do not cross me."

Then Rose bore down, who cared for all the children, white & yellow & black, and taught them to be good. Shaking her head, she shamed me for malingering. She snatched up the bag and she handed it to Young M'sieu, quoting from a homily of the priest

some words about Caesar and his own, though with the gloss that all was Caesar's in that yard.

Did Rose know the bag would prick Young Master's skin through the cloth of his pocket? For the pouch was not meant for him. Yet he did not return my talisman to me. Rather, he commanded the butler, Jean-François, called Sénégal, bury the bag near the kitchen shed, not far from the cooks' garden, whence a runty pup dug it up and retrieved it to me. Grown to a man, I felt no shame to raid the young master's father's books, indeed to violate their chastity, those virgin volumes which, were they to escape heat and damp, would be Pamphile's.

Like many another slave, I pilfered from resentment and yearned for my freedom. Yet I was not dissatisfied with scrivener's work. Indeed I counted myself FORTUNATE, for I had seen my lot improve in all particulars. I ate not only the lard-fried yams of the field hands, but scraps from M'sieu's own table, thrown at his behest by the grudging slampoke Vérité, whom he had recently bought from Ravenal. (She was a secretive, muttering cripple whose fierce aspect frightened all, yet whose kid *aigredouce* with sesame seeds did ravish the palates of high and low.) I had been issued a bowl & a jar of my own to daily wash, and two sets of linen, nicely mended, if short in the sleeves, and the lace torn off. As my work involved ink, and bending of the elbow, I wore no footman's livery, but M'sieu's old breeches and a sleeved waistcoat, though with no cravat for my shirt. Had my shoes kept their buckles, I would have passed for a schoolmaster, or even, so I fancied, a factor's clerk. I sat on the stool with my book poised above my ledger sheet, my quill close at hand, watching lest the knob turn in the door. And when I slit folios, I did it with panache—a grand gentleman poring over maps of a huge domain.

Yet along a secret byway of my soul's back country, I had sequestered A PLOT. My intrigue were to shadow M'sieu in the

philosophic project he had undertaken with the Sage of Montbard. I would compile a prodigious compendium of natural & moral histories, setting forth in orderly fashion the commemorative particulars of Guinée, fauna & flora & diverse terrains along with accounts of industries & customs & beliefs, not neglecting the maxims & fables by which we bondsmen have been guided since captivity and transportation.

You may say, Kind Reader, our history had been set forth in the copious works of M. de Buffon. Yet I tell you plain, he has not observed us close enough. Oh, never could I bring myself to inscribe on tea labels any part of the passage I am about to set down, which cut and soothed me, at the same time, like the ministrations of a clumsy surgeon. From the moment of my first reading, these words have been inscribed on my heart, in all their sympathetic treachery:

Even though Negroes have little intelligence, they do not fail to have a great deal of feeling; they are gay or melancholy, hard working or idle, friends or enemies according to the way they are treated; when they are well fed and they are not mistreated, they are happy, joyful, ready to do anything, and the satisfaction of their spirit is written on their faces; but when they are mistreated, they take the sorrow straight to heart and sometimes perish from sorrow; they are therefore very sensitive to kindnesses and insults, and they carry a mortal hatred against those who have mistreated them; when, on the contrary, they have a liking for a master, there is nothing they are not capable of doing to show him their zeal and devotion. They are naturally compassionate and even tender with their children, their friends, their compatriots; they willingly share the little they have with those they see as needy, without even knowing them except by their poverty. They have, therefore, as can be seen, an excellent heart. They have the seed of all

virtues, and I cannot write their history without being moved by their state. Are they not unhappy enough at being reduced to servitude, at being obligated always to work without ever being able to acquire anything? Is it also necessary to exhaust them, strike them, and treat them like animals? Humanity revolts against these hateful treatments that a greed for profits has created. . . .

—"Variétés," *Histoire Naturelle*, III

In asserting we be men of "little intelligence," possessing but the "seed of all virtues," did Buffon himself not fortify the prejudice he sought to counter? And *gay*? Gay, as we are worked to death? Even as this great but sometimes careless philosopher had told of the creatures & customs of the world from the point of view of a white man, I would write from the point of view of a black one. For it must be proclaimed to our captors that we are not only acted upon, as animals or plants or minerals, according to our masters' whims and lights, but are actors ourselves, fully capable of living as our own masters.

In so doing, I would open for inspection THE GENIUS OF MY PEOPLE, proving we who had been stolen from Guinée THE EQUALS IN EVERY RESPECT OF OUR MASTERS, and DESERVING OF LIBERTY. In this tenet lay the disobedience of my plan, though I did not wish a living soul any ill, but sought to reveal our true & noble nature. I was emboldened to undertake this perilous and grand task because I believed I had the capability. And I was so inclined.

Thus, even as M'sieu had tramped about the isle collecting in his own manner, I commenced to reap a harvest of my fellow bondsmen's knowings, like a faithful bee storing up honey. My collection were accomplished in bits & pieces, for I must glean from the talk of my fellows, whose colloquies unfolded around the cooking fires in the short evening between work & sleep. And we

## SHADOW HISTOIRE

were oft interrupted by the drivers, yellow bosses coercing the hands to early retirement to certify the prospect of early rising. Yet from the swift exchange our wits drew sustenance, each sensibility feeding off the ardor of the others. We had little to share but our OWN CREATIONS, nothing to gain but mutual succor. So our words flew from our hearts into air as a chorus of birds that fills the air with music.

Damzillah's child, he

*Jumped in the fire.*

Fire too hot,

*Jumped in the pot.*

Pot too black,

*Jumped in a crack.*

Crack too high,

*jumped in the sky.*

Sky too blue,

*jumped in a canoe.*

Canoe got a hole,

*Jumped in a bowl,*

bowl too deep,

*jumped in the creek.*

Creek too shallow,

*jumped in the tallow,*

Tallow too soft,

*Jumped in the loft,*

Loft leaked rain,

*Jumped in the cane,*

Cane moon-bright

*Stayed up all night.*

"Was this a man of special powers," asked a hand. "Come into his own by moonlight?"

Some said he was, some said he wasn't.

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“Night or day,” said old Rose. “Too much mind is given to rumors of magic. No spells cooking around this place, though I have heard of flying slaves. ’Tis said there were one or two field hands on Le Faneau’s place whose driver would not let them rest. They raised and lowered their arms, raised and lowered them, fingers spread like vultures’ wing-tips, and sailed aloft. Those men sailed all the way over the water, home to Guinée. Some say Juba was one of them.

“Then there was Fait-Tout, the do-all kettle, that could turn into an ax, a bill, a pick, a hoe, would do whatever work needed to be done. Long ago, before any of you were born or brought here, Petit-Jean had Fait-Tout. When it was time to hoe for planting, he’d take his stool and the kettle and go out and sit in the shade. He’d sing:

Ma-wa-loo-si, ko-da-ba-si  
Ground need hoeing, get off my knee.

“Fait-Tout would jump off his knee, make itself into a hoe, turn over all the earth in the fields, do the work of a whole gang, everyone just sitting in the shade, no-one even holding the hoe-handle. Then Fait-Tout made itself a shovel, dug the trenches and laid the cane cuttings very nicely end to end, covered them just so, with a light, even layer of soil.

“By this time Petit-Jean was fanning himself with a leaf, laughing with a woman who had come out with a bucket of water. Before their eyes—even before the sun went down—little sprouts grew from the cuttings Fait-Tout had set.

“Petit-Jean sang another song:

Loo-wa sa-si, ki-ta-bay  
Time for supper, quit this play.

“Fait-Tout turned itself back into a kettle, went home and cooked Petit-Jean some pork and some greens.

“About three days later, the cane was tall and ripe. Petit-Jean went out with his kettle, and it turned into a bill. It went up and down the rows by itself, cutting cane until the whole field was done. Again the gang was resting in the shade, fanning themselves with leaves, even the driver. They only got up and looked busy when the captain rode by.

“That Fait-Tout even fed those stalks into the mill, though truly I can’t imagine how it did that. All the while everyone was resting, fanning themselves with leaves, all except Marius, a hand in that gang, who was squinting out of one eye, scheming how he might get that kettle. He thought it was wasted doing everyone’s work, giving all the hands a rest. Marius would use it to show what he could do by himself, and get himself hired out, and earn money toward his freedom. When he was free, he would buy a piece of land, and Fait-Tout would work it for him, and Marius would become very rich, and buy a great house, and lord it over all the souls around there.

“He wanted that kettle so much, he could taste the bitter juice of wanting in his mouth. Marius thought he would die if he did not get that kettle. So, one night when Petit-Jean was visiting Li-Lu, the woman who came to the fields with the bucket of water, Marius crept into Petit-Jean’s house and stole the kettle.

“The next day Marius went to the captain. He said he was sick and tired of the slow, lazy workers he found himself among. He wanted his own field to turn over, his own cane to plant. If the master were satisfied with the crop, he could hire Marius out, bring in ready cash.

“Marius ran home and got his stool and went out into the field the captain gave him to work. He set the kettle in his lap, and he sang as Petit-Jean had:

Ma-wa-loo-si, ko-da-ba-si

Ground need hoeing, get off my knee.

“Fait-Tout went to work. The kettle turned over all the earth, dug trenches, and set cane cuttings, laying them end-to-end just so. Fait-Tout did that whole field, cleared some ground next to it that had never been cleared before, turned that ground over, dug more trenches, laid more cuttings end to end, and covered them just so. By sunset, the cane shoots were already poking through the ground. Meanwhile, Petit-Jean’s gang was back out in the sun, everybody breaking his back. Petit-Jean was too busy to wonder where Fait-Tout had gone, and nobody missed Marius much. At the end of the day, the people were glad to go home, and Li-Lu made Petit-Jean’s supper for him, because he no longer had a kettle.

“Marius was hungry too. He said to Fait-Tout, ‘You have put in one fine day’s work! Now it’s time we went home.’

“Fait-Tout paid no attention, but started jumping up and down at the edge of the fields, as if he could hardly wait for that cane to grow up, so he could cut it.

“‘Did you hear me?’ Marius asked. ‘Enough is enough. I tell you, it is time we made our way home.’

“The worse for him, Marius did not know the song for day’s end. He should have said:

Loo-wa sa-si, ki-ta-bay  
Time for supper, quit this play.

“Alas, he didn’t know the words. He continued to scold Fait-Tout, and to urge him home, but Fait-Tout went one by one into all the fields the gangs had left. He took up where they left off, doing whatever needed to be done, hoeing and trenching and setting out cuttings. Then, without so much as a pause, Fait-Tout turned itself into a bill. The cane wasn’t tall enough to be chopped, but Fait-Tout chopped it anyway, chopped the young sprouts into tiny pieces no good to anyone, then turned back into a hoe, dug up all the cane cuttings laid in the trenches, turned

into an ax, chopped those cuttings to bits. Then Fait-Tout went after the corn, planted to feed just about every living creature on that place, save the ones in the big house, which is where Fait-Tout was headed. With his ax-blade self he had chopped down all us bondsmen's houses; now he was going after the master's. Marius had long since fled. They say the militia got him in the swamp over on Sainte-Marie-la-Belle. That kettle worked all night, while everyone hid with his hands over his head, thinking a powerful storm-wind was blowing.

"By morning, the island was devastated. Everyone had to start all over again, but without Fait-Tout. The kettle had tired itself out—lost all its magic powers. It was just a kettle again. Petit-Jean gave it to Li-Lu for a wedding present. Everyone else went back to work.

"Since that time, there hasn't been a kettle like Fait-Tout anywhere around here. We have to do our work the hard way. That is about all the good we have had from magic here."

So Rose had the tale from those who told her, though its shape has changed in seasons of telling. Or its edges have been nibbled by winged oblivion bearers, as it lay for years in the conjure chest in the house called Remember.

Dearer to Pierre than the tale itself, THE MEMORY OF ROSE, who by day presided over prattling infants, white and black, by night told stories in the moonlight, tapping her bare, misshapen feet, her knobby hands folded on her stick. The whites kept her for her uncanny way of spying through dim old eyes the wandering of children and, indeed, of cows, so that, upon her crying out, they could be saved from falling into pit or pot. She let the whites think that spying and saving were her only gifts.

She waited till the cows were penned for the night, the eminent heir had been herded to bed. Then, in firelight and moonlight,

Rose and other godmothers told the stories, so we would learn who we were and whence we had come.

One bright evening, the moonlit children at her feet, Rose looked out through her cloudy eyes and did abjure me thus:

“Good Pierre Baptiste, my godson, you must inscribe our stories in books, so they will not be lost when old Rose goes, for my hands tremble, and my voice quavers. Pierre, you must keep the stories.”

Indeed, too few storytellers lived beyond body-pounding labor and coarse, scanty food to wisdom years—yet I was afraid to commit to the physical plane my collection of tellings, my CYCLOPEDIA HISTOIRE OF GUINÉE AND BEYOND. I hid it in the metaphysical realm, though I wrote on tea labels certain epigrammatical keys, viz., for the kettle tale, “The good we have had of magic here.” In the memory house of seraphic crystal with chests of light and dark in all the rooms, each key unlocked a drawer that held an account of many words. In this way I kept my histoire in memory, against the day when I had more and better paper than those scrappy relicts, the tea labels. For I dared not steal my master’s fool’s cap, as he counted every sheet. Thus did I sequester my cyclopedish histoire in my conjure-house fortress, behind stockade the masters could not breach.

“I am not a coward,” I swore it to old Rose. “I am not—”

When I had paid the bond of my freedom, on that day I would scribble from dawn to dusk on very good paper at a very fine desk, with a fine supply of fresh-sharpened quills to hand. My brow fanned by a silent and loyal amanuensis, I would write the ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE CUSTOMS AND INDUSTRIES AND TRUE RELIGION OF SLAVES TRANSPORTED FROM GUINÉE, WITH FABLES AND MAXIMS, THE COLLECTED ENTIRETY PROVING US WORTHY OF THE STATUS OF FREE MEN.

“I see,” said old Rose. “And who would this amanuensis be?”

"Oh," I said, "there will be a great turn in the fortunes of Men. I have it from Squint, who is Protestant and talks to God. The bottom log will be on top, but the day has yet to come."

"You say so," said old Rose. "And who will be driver then?"

Rose did not give much credence to the prognostications of Squint, who made so great a show of sympathy with those he drove. When he whipped a hand, he would draw blood, having laid on stripes, so the master might see he had not shirked his charge; yet he might then lay the last two strokes on the fence or the side of the barn, to gain the gratitude of his victim. 'Twere a stubborn quashee did refuse to bellow on behalf of the plank.

Two-faced, crooked-hearted, worm-tongued: Squint would take a woman for his trouble, were the use of one proffered. But his kindnesses, he said, were not kindness at all. Did not the Bible prophesy a Judgment Day would descend upon Earth in a rain of fire, the dead rise from the deep? Much that was hidden would be known; the last would be first, the poor inherit the earth.

Against that day, Squint would save us, and so himself. He had a Bible, which he could read, along with the signs in the heavens. He would shake the cake from his long Dutch pipe and give a man a complicitous wink, "When the bottom is top, then do remember Tom, who kept you from trouble and gave you the leg up. Do remember Tom when the bottom rail be top."

The captain was proof of the oddity at world's heart. Though TOM SQUINT had no doubt been conceived in the womb of a woman, he was an inconceivable queer-freckled lanky-bones with squinty, side-gazing, light blue eyes, tolerably bright, though very yellow still. His mother had been a fancy girl kept by the son of a planter of Virginie, in the English domains due North of Saint-Michel. By his blood relation to whites, and his skill in diverse trades, viz., the carpenter's, cooper's, smith's, & mason's, he ingratiated himself with his master & father, who let him hire his

time around. And he prospered, though his father would not sell him his freedom.

The women in Virginie were given to merriment at the expense of his squintiness; they did dimple and blush when he demanded consolation for their smirking and simpering. And they allowed him to paddle the backs of their necks and fiddle their plackets. And these attentions to a certain girl's person did land him in a right mess of trouble with his father, a huge pink lout who caned him till the blood ran from his head, and he was left for dead. For it seems Tom had been caught squinting into the placket of his mother's successor.

So Tom fled with the clothes on his back, and, having been pressed as an ordinary seaman, saw many exotic ports. He was promoted to bosun before he tired of bloody-crunch biscuit, short-ration rum, & wormy beef. He jumped ship in New Portugal, ran up debts at cards, re-indentured himself to pay them, was lost at cards to a Frenchman, and branded over, and finally bought by Dufay, who saw he would get an overseer he would not have to keep in the style a white man required. Dufay raised him to driver at once, and, by dint of cash bonuses, a snug cot with stone walls, a mule with a saddle, and generous rations of rum, prevailed on him to make peace with his indentures. He could keep his surname, *Blount*, and wear soft shoes fit to his feet and stride with a whip to chastise at whim. He could have what women the whites disdained. Yet, not those points, but ague in his joints & fevers in his blood & fluxes in his bowels—all manner of enervating malady—encouraged him to settle into his lot. He lived no worse than M. Devere, the governor of the master's children, who, though conversant in Greek and Latin, occupied a house no larger than Thomas's and possessed fewer clothes, though he did have a slave to wait on him who slept in his yard.

Squint's fingers might itch for placket, yet he strove to keep the peace and earn a quiet dotage. He taught us to avoid flogging.

And, did he get a goat or a sheep, he gave it to the people to cook. He would give away the last thing he had, but he would take the last thing you had. That was the way he was. Yet, if I am telling of him, I should further digress, and relate what part he played in my bringing up.

When my MOTHER, Marie Mandilé-Ba, had been sold away, Cap'n Tom, 'pon the very night of the AUCTION, regretted the part he had been forced to play, in clapping Ernani in irons, to prevent her running away. He wrapped her legs in rags so the irons would not chafe them. Though she wailed, he said, "like a mourner at her own funeral," he did not stuff her mouth with rags, but smoothed her hair with his hand. After a time she was not as stiff as she had been, so he gave her water, which he could see she but held in her mouth.

"Ernani," he said, "do not revile your jailer. I will not be spit on. Be good enough to swallow, Little Girl."

"Marie Mandilé-Ba!" she choked, with such vehemence he supposed at first she were cursing him, so he made the sign of the cross, to protect himself, though he had forsworn Papist witchery.

"Not 'Ernani,'" she said. "Not 'Little Girl.'"

And he called her Marie Mandilé-Ba until her lot was knocked down and she was taken by people from up in the hills, decent people, though not prosperous, and no longer young, so he feared the work would be hard. This was the last I heard of my mother.

Now he would not have heard her chosen name before, said Rose. For Marie Mandilé-Ba had hoped to please her master by acquiescing to the name *he* had chosen, waiting on him pretty, working without complaint in his fields, caring dainty for his children, and, indeed, bearing his children. Oh, I was Jolicoeur's child, you could see from my eyes. But some of the children Rose watched might have had two fathers. Their eyes did not match.

It would have been better for me to have another father, for Jolicoeur was no protector. Even as Marie was being sold, he was stockaded for impudence in his own master's yard; he tried to run away, but he was turned in to the militia for reward.

"Marie!" they said he called from the pen where he was kept. "Marie Mandilé-Ba, you." But she was far away, and they stopped his mouth with rags. Some said he succeeded in running away and reached the maroons. And some said he hung himself with a rope he had made by tearing his smock into strips.

Did Mandilé-Ba pray for deliverance? If she did, the Gods must have hidden in the clouds that day. Only Squint was there, familiar, devious, not unkind. She begged him to WATCH FOR HER SON, to sustain him and help him, even as a FATHER would. Her tears fell on his hands, which she brought to her mouth and kissed, and wept some more. Oh, it were truly a piteous spectacle, he allowed. She should not have been sold without her babe. Squint should have spoken up. Alas! What was done was done. He would do what he could for me.

Sooth, it served Pierre well to be watched by a man who was close to the whites, so said Squint. My favor in the eyes of the Lord be manifest in my election to the company of the saved, viz., himself. But if Judgment were delayed beyond his life in his body, Squint would have me be useful to those who had privilege to dispense in this world. In my boyhood he surreptitiously taught me to lay bricks and hoop barrels, to shoe horses and sharpen knives and distill brandy & cetera, that I might be raised from the gang to a comfortable life, hiring out my time, earning coppers toward my freedom while lining my master's purse. And when old Christophe died in his tracks, it was Tom Squint who touted me for PREFERMENT.

I was taken up to the house from the carries and taught to mix paints and color backgrounds. I was brought on errands to the big

island where I saw a barber as black as I who wore a velvet coat and kept four slaves.

Yet Tom warned my master 'gainst my schooling; he said I knew too much already and would not keep my place, to which M'sieu responded, he would not suffer dictation of an o'erreaching driver. He would school me; I would keep my place; Tom must look to his.

When I could read quite well, I came to Tom, and said we should read together, from his Bible, but when I looked at the words, I could not read them, for they were in English. Now I most earnestly sought to learn this language, for there were books in that tongue on my master's shelves. Yet Tom would not teach me.

And how would he stand at The Judgment if he had refused his fellow the Word of the Lord? Ah well, he said, Jesus had made His disciples fishers of men, not fishers of words from books. Yet I could read the scriptures in Latin well enough to know, Tom's readings were unorthodox. His scriptures were Protestant, he said, whereas mine were Catholic. I suppose he read half the words, and invented the rest; perhaps he read not at all, but opened the book at random and improvised, thus fortifying the argument of Père Gouy, that the Bible were best expounded by those upon whom God had laid His Hands.

Yet I did a fair trade with those of my fellows who would learn to read and write in dust, as I had. They traded me necessities, viz., a bowl of milk, for teaching. And on the Sabbath, except at harvest, I taught in secret in the bush, though only after setting watch. And I earned the disapprobation of that Tom who was not so thorough a Protestant he wished every person born with two legs could read. He threatened me with the cunning whip called Stinger, that had hooked nails driven through the thongs, yet he did not betray our school to Dufay.

Though he imparted a gospel of his own devising and made me a heretic to any creed but his own, still I must allow: Captain

Tom Blount, known as Squint, were a USEFUL FRIEND to men below him in the hierarchy of conditions. He had been charged with warning us into our dwellings at night, yet he cut short our suppers only when cane must be harvested. If work were light, he came himself to sit at our fires, a whistle on his lips, pulling fish still flopping from his pockets, and sometimes he brought rum. Though we were constrained in his presence, we did not discourage him with silence, for we knew he did not carry tales.

In all our fireside gatherings, he took a lively part, having learned the patois smart enough, though he knew less of his lineage than I, nor did he care for old stories. He be a man in motion, he said. Removing his shoes and lighting his odd curved pipe, he gave us in tales the ports he had seen when his ship touched shore, in the time when he lived as a seaman. Thus I got the scent and hand of the stuff called *Freedom*, from one who had been freer than any of us were.

My earliest conception were never to wrap so bright a yellow's reminiscences & rumors in the same 'cyclopedic bundle with the wisdom of Guinée. But he, queer, speckled yellow, stood at near as great a distance as we from the masters; no more like than the rudest hands to have his accounts incorporated into any histoire but my own. Was not Squint a bondsman too? I expanded my CYCLOPEDISH CONCEPTION to accommodate all the men—even the smaller whites—who are not great, or patronized by the great, but are simply MEN.

Yet time and again I raised the question of his place in the shadow histoire, for he was our driver, who whipped us. I shall not fatigue you with the full account of my backings and fillings on the sticking point, whether Tom Squint, Captain of Drivers, were meet for a slavish histoire. I have greatly digressed from dilating on the subject of my own ambition: to use my COMMON SENSE to observe and record the history of my people, transported into bondage from Guinée, discovering to the world OUR GENIUS,

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proving us THE EQUAL OF OUR MASTERS, as deserving of LIBERTY as they. No more than to my master could I reveal to jealous Squint the full extent of my reading, and, more dangerous than reading, writing. Let it suffice to have set forth my manner of preserving in memory, by means of epigrammatic keys, that would not greatly compromise me if discovered, the design & substance of a very compendious histoire.

Having recorded, then, my GRAVE MISGIVING, whether tales of crook-face Squint, the driver, do belong in the histoire, I shall embark on the relation of my own ADVENTURE. For soon enough, I, who had settled into a quiet, bookish life, was tarred with a brush that Providence had surely reserved for the leering Tom, bumping his belly against the buttocks of women bending to cut the cane—Squint, that salty, salty cock.

## PART THE FOURTH

### *The Trouble I Took to Wife*



I have allowed we bonded men were cajoled to BREED; one day Squint, having taken me aside, mysteriously circumlocuted some nonsensical matters whilst stroking the slant of his sharp-angle jaw, then drove more direct to his point: “Now, as our master has treated you with very great favor, and fostered your excellence in letters and ciphers, he has asked me to beg you consider, would it not be virtuous to answer his magnanimity with a modest loyalty?”

I hoped I had acceded to my master’s wishes in the smallest particulars; I would know on what grounds I had given offense. Ah!

Tapping ’gainst his boot the whip that he used on the hands’ recalcitrant hides, though never till now on my own, Captain Tom allowed that I had disappointed with a too fastidious CHASTITY. For though I had weathered a score of years, I had not cast my eye on a wife, so did not sufficiently increase my master’s estate, and did him as great a harm as did I pilfer rum.

Now I enjoyed my repute as a handsome, fine-talking fellow. Why, Pierre Baptiste no more than the next red-blood forswore to

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tip a skirt above a head! And prided himself his good John Fish were esteemed a fair-sized catch! Many a placket weir had baited him in, though, yes, 'twere true he swerved back out again, so as not to slight the others who wished to lure his fish. No, I did not care to boast, yet I was certain offspring of mine were inscribed on my master's rolls, and if pressed 'gainst my modesty, would point to a most respectable roster. Yet Squint on the master's behalf would settle not for a furtive tumble but did press me still to a plighted breeder's sober life. And now indeed I were sorely vexed.

For I was an orphan, pulled mewling from his mother's breast. And, though my several godmothers had generously nourished me, I had been sensible from earliest youth of a solitude dispelled by no bright company; I had never looked to be consoled by a mate. Moreover, Reason told me, I could guarantee no prospects to my young beyond the care I took to school the pupils of several ages in my secret school. Pierre's own rise to a protected position had been but a partial good fortune; still he was wholly owned, and subject to the whim of whites. Had not his mother been sold when the first old mistress flinched at her crooked arm? What thoughtful man would visit on the head of a child an inherited affliction?

"Goody, my bucko, I tip you now a wink," said Master Squint, the captain of the drivers. "I bid you prudently take it. Consider a match from amongst the fillies around our place, who carry themselves so dainty, and who eye your position in the house with favor. There goes Mimette, tall, well-grown, fine-boned, with those high breasts, standing straight out. Mimette would make a man a handsome wife."

Indeed, already she was eyed by those above my station. Driver Tom had leering glanced, and Pamphile had handed Mimette an orchid for her hair. I would not marry a woman who sported a white man's favor, though she had no choice, so I would not choose Mimette, nor the full-fleshed Quasheba, with her ready

laugh, nor clever Dido, nor any of the girls who quick-stepped work to song in kitchen and yard and field. Nor would I choose among the ladies' maids, who held their chins so high.

"'Tis true she will droop when the young come, year after year, to suck the pertness from the once-fine bags. So it is with women all. Now if she were white, and you, my buck, there'd be no end of trouble to rid yourself of her when she passed her prime. 'Tis as well to be a slave in this; for your choice of a woman have no weight in law. Dufay will sell her if she irk you with reproaches, for these bitches are nothing to him when they are old and please not the eye and no longer earn their keep."

Ah Squint! How low and vile you deemed me, who would plot before the nuptials to sell the mother of his children when she sagged with years and work! Yet I plotted right enough, indeed I did: my work in the big house had bred in me the aspiration to be master of my condition. Oh, I did not scheme as some did, to purchase freedom only to set up my own plantation, with my own slaves, my own hard drivers. No, I did not look to govern others, or enrich myself from their stooping, but, as the ancient stoics commend us, to govern myself, to take of life what could not be taken, or at least, was not like to be.

The curvet and leap of Master Fish 'round the winsome notwithstanding, I resolved to court for a WIFE a plain, industrious, skilled woman, who might be useful, yet was not likely to attract the amorous sighs of whites, of quadroons, of octoroons, of full-bloods, or even of tawnies. And better suited to my intents than plain, I resolved to woo a homely wench. And better suited than homely, ugly. And than ugly, hideous, viz., the fearsome queen of kettle and spit. Yes, unbeknownst to her as yet, my nesting choice had come to settle on the finger-wagging slampoke Pélérine Vérité—Pilgrim Truth—who was called "Sweet Snarl" (*Douce Farouche*) by the whites. She would not bind me in embrace to what I stood to lose! For though one side of her face be smooth

and beauteous shapely, and incite to languorous longing, the other be stiff and crooked, its several parts melted together, as a candle mold that has been thrown in a fire, her winsome smile twisted with scars to a leer. Upon any who came up on her good side with covetous supplications, she flashed at once her bad side, and glared at him through her bad eye, muttering and raving 'till the cold hand of her affliction squeeze his heart, and he back away.

The master suffered her snarls for her mousse and paté, her bisque and fricassee, that were the envy of the planters all about, though Master compelled her beneath his gaze to taste each dish, so great his fear of poison.

PÉLÉRINE VÉRITÉ had but one good leg beneath her skirt, the other being stiff and wizened, yet in the light of the full moon some had seen her climbing for coconuts with both legs wrapped supple 'round the tree trunk. 'Twas said the fowl were affrighted by her halting daytime gait, so the bolder wags set up a spirited clucking when she passed, darting malevolent looks from the glittering, slitty eye on her scarred side, the eye of a woman living dead. 'Twas claimed her former master had poured boiling water into that eye—then wide and bright as its mate—when he caught her digging into his wife's grave a length of cloth Vérité had been given for a dress, so the bondswoman could dig it up later to make herself a witchy dress. Yet the boiling water had not blinded the eye, so how could she be human? Fie now! She had been sold from a far-away plantation; how could a soul in the yard be privy to stories she had not told? Yet rumors abounded.

The master himself credited gossip touching on the wisdom of keeping from her hands his cut hair and nail parings and any bodily excretions, with which, it was said, did Vérité brew potions, she could conjure ill upon a body. Dufay did burn his nail parings himself, and those of his wife, and of Pamphile, though not of his yard brats, commending their smoky souls to God. Oh, Vérité

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scoffed! To see chamber pots steaming secret through daybreak dew in the trusted hands of old Nurse Rose, who dumped 'em in the distillery vat, to keep the hands from drinking the brew.

When Vérité's evening work was done, she sat with her raggedy-eared cat, Scratch, before her fire, smoking a pipe, like a man, while she hooked an exquisite lace of seed-pod floss. Yes, while Scratch licked between his toes, she crocheted with a tiny crook of bone said to be of a human child, muttering her contempt for the whites, from whom she hid her webs of lace, hanging them from the twiggy roof of her house like the nets of a spider.

"Piss in my fingers, they would still be gold. I embroider Old Uncle the air, the clouds, this thread that draws the eye to what it desires, raises the shining flowers, brightest stars, flights to feather birds. Brighter still! He will have lace at His throat that is webbed from fancy, the movement of women beneath men's hands, the reach of the heart to the name of the sky. And all needs blessed with neither back-break nor trouble. For what pleasures fools will kill! No mercy the offal world confers! Blood will not honor bloody Old Uncle. Dress Him in brocade of what you pray against, the dead in their clattery bodies rising. White ladies douse their hands to bleach them whiter. What can Old Uncle want with their piss? Bones stripped of flesh do bleach in sun! Old Uncle cares nothing for whiteness. For Him a woman walks on sand, her bleeding embroiders the cloak that will dress the dead, raise them star-eyed, mango-handed. Uncle is no soul-snatching ghoul, no Baron Skull. He whips no lather from unseen horses to fright the virtuous souls from their beds."

Every morning as the piss walked by, Vérité sprinkled new white sand on the floor of her house and squeezed a lime, then an orange. And around her rose a great pure, sweet, fresh coolness. She bathed herself in three waters, scented with jasmine, ginger, and basil, and wrapped her head in a bark-dyed cloth, bright red,

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then went to the kitchen of Dufay, to see that the pastry flaked sweet on tooth and tongue, the bird was boned close and pretty. The whites believed her onion patties concocted for them, but Vérité served the will of Uncle, and kept back always a portion for Him, with a bit for Scratch.

Do you hear in your dreams the beating of the drum? Do you hear the tinkle of the clavichord? Sound webbing sound devours the world and spins it to food for spider Soul. Old Uncle! Only to Him would Vérité submit, and she spat on the man that would trifle with her vows. 'Twas said her spittle 'graved marks that burned, and she had oft been blamed for the pox.

"Who would be flayed by her god-boss tongue?" so joked the hands. "A man stand no more chance with her than a rat with her cat."

Yet what had I to fear—I in whose talisman pouch rested broken shells of the eggs of birds that could speak as men; sea shells resembling a woman's pudenda that cried when the wind blew fresh; and labels of tea packets, written over with sayings & epigrams, my commonplace book. In the web of my own intent, I schemed. If I must marry, I would marry, but breed I would not. The kettle-grudge suited my obstinate though apparently obliging purpose, she who was rumored to have sewn up what remained of her burned womb, further paying with her flesh the pillage she had endured. So I made bold to woo her. Though she spat on my first most complimentary approach, viz., "Hail, bright beauty!" I bowed like a prince, and did not from proximity get any pox, and soon events contrived to buoy up my suit.

One fine eve M'sieu entertained an ASSEMBLY of guests. Safe from the night vapors in the great house, the company did sip from the rum bowls, looking out with much merriment 'pon a curious SPECTACLE M'sieu had contrived to mount, emulating a practice of the taxonomical Swede, M. von Linné, the most

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esteemed LINNAEUS, the rival to my master's own M. de Buffon. Dufay, claiming *he* were no ass-heart, to forswear for spite an ingenious invention, had caused to be fastened to the carapaces of ponderous TORTOISES some candles which, when lit, and the tortoises permitted to take their meandersome way, did bobble in the dark in a glimmering sarabande, flickering but stately, to delight the ladies, who swore they were frightened and made pretense of swooning into sundry gentlemen's laps as the turtles roamed the mazy parterre amidst the plantings of boxwood and lavender that but feebly withstood the onslaught of orchid and the general broad-leafed tropical confusion into which the turtles would soon disappear, though not before the gentlemen had had occasion to relish a game of tickle-and-slap-the-ladies.

Upon spying the flickering LIGHTS in the maze, many women of the yard did fall to their knees on the swept, packed dirt, and clasp their hands in fervent prayer, as did many of our men, for mundane explanations would not overturn our conviction that the lights that beckoned in the dark were the souls of departed TAWNIES who had once inhabited these Anduvean isles, viz., the souls of those Xuacomac enslaved before us.

The tawnies who did not flee altogether had died in a grievous short time of a very great multitude of causes, viz., overwork, & diseases of love, & paucity of nourishment, & a loathing of cultivation and of settled life. The lights on the backs of the tortoises roaming the night, many swore were the souls of these wretched tawnies, whose corpses had not been dispatched upon rafts with the customary rites of kind and kin, but had been rolled into shallow graves at the whites' command, and praised but a hasty farewell under stern surveillance, inasmuch as the whites did not care for their bondsmen to assemble in the honor that death commands.

Now the UNCLE of the place, whose claim was old on these islands, older than the claims of our Guinée Gods, or any claim of

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the Christian God, had demanded we adopt the tawny practice of pushing the dead out to sea on rafts. Yet the whites did not like us to emulate the tawnies, supposing we plotted a rising. They forbade our gathering. If one of us died, they called up their scurvy militia of landless little whites to roll the dead one into a grave in the dust that dogs and pigs defiled.

When first the whites had thwarted the ancient way of these Anduves, the desecration so cast down the spirits of us, many died of checked mourning, their dammed-up sorrow wreaking in their hearts a great devastation, so they sickened, and lay on their sides to stare at their walls of twigs, and could not or would not stir, though they be whipped to death. Many took their own lives by poison or the rope.

In the time when I, Pierre Baptiste, WOODED Pélérine Vérité, the funeral rites had again been permitted, our masters having overcome their fear of our assembly in greater fear of losing to pandemic grief the capital invested in our persons. Thus we did assemble on memorial occasions to make a seaward procession, singing the candlelit raft into starry night, praising the dead, and the dead before them, and the dead to come, that they might reach their protecting hands from the world beyond, to comfort us in our affliction.

Yet the lapsed rites of the earlier time, when custom had not yet conferred on us the liberty to mourn in the way of the islands, pulsed like one great fearful heart of wrong among us still. And the sight of the bobbing turtle-borne lights, that thrilled the furbelowed, white-wigged guests in the gilded chairs, devastated us ragged servants who knelt bareheaded in the dirt of the yard. For even I, who could read and write, had drunk with my god-mothers' milk the stories of the INJURED DEAD, and my heart beat large in my breast in fear of the guttering, wind-buffed flames. Though I had seen with my own eyes the candles affixed to the backs of the turtles, I feared the tawnies denied their rites,

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rolling over in their shallow graves, still raw bones and hungry light, waiting for their chance to dispossess us of our bodies, daring not to touch the whites. We hapless blacks would be suffered to wander as lights ourselves, barefoot and naked, desperate in wind, ever fearful of Baron Skull, lest he ride us down and force us to undertake for eternity, at unbearable pace, the meanest body-breaking labors, viz., chopping, hoeing, & cutting, in the hottest sun, with the poorest food, with no chance of respite, all the while plagued by the itching and scabbing diseases, and hosts of insects and worms, worse than any yet known to living bodies, and all without the blessing of Sabbath or rum.

And 'gainst this dire eventuality, our people set out their suppers of callaloo and cassava bread for the turtle-borne lights, to feed them. And we occupied ourselves in getting up a procession of mourners as best we could without notice, arraying ourselves in our finest clothes despite the fatigue of our accustomed travail. And gently Farouche unhooked from her twiggy walls her lengths of lace and wrapped the men's necks with stocks and draped the women's shoulders with fichus and shawls, and puffed up delicate caps for the women, too. And we squandered our precious stores of candle stubs (which we were wont to pocket when we could), and, lighting them, floated them into the wave on palm leaves, so the restless dead might see how enthusiastically we organized their obsequies. And we went so far as to float our pipes of burning tobacco on the wave. And the solemn dance with which we honored the sacrificial gleaming on the water—the very path to the beyond—was received with shrieks and titters of merriment in the great house, as the cap to the evening's entertainment.

“Suck on a teat of night-chill. Why will you drink from a broken cup? Fie, blood, burn, burn, burn. Oh, this body, who can say it is my own, oh, why will you have me? Pipe ash and rat dung. They

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have left me an empty pod for a heart, a sweetmeat roasted in sugar, a whore's dainty. Oh, see Him eat it, the rot setting in, how He belches and farts. Pfaugh! Pfaugh! Vapors of pestilence. No heart beats in a plucked, hung fowl. See the stilled and staring eye? Why would you ask a husk to be a horse, to rise and drown them in rum?"

And with no warning at all, a STORM broke sudden, with cracks of light that tore the sky apart, dismembering it and shattering as glass the pale laughter of the powdered specters that crowded the French doors. Then whipped-up waters rose in heights of demon glee and rolled across our island. The whites crawled under the tables and whinnied for the barring of the shutters, but they had to do it themselves, for we bondsmen cowered terrified. Yet in the downpour the lights on the backs of the turtles were dowsed, and we took heart; we threw ourselves on the ground to offer thanks, all but Sweet Snarl, she whom Uncle was already mounting as a horse, Great Uncle Thunder, spirit of the place that had been defiled.

SHE AND SHE shuddered in her drenched fripperies and clapped her hands, and the very earth we lay on shook with the pounding dance of her and her good foot, whilst the huge-eyed Scratch circled yowling in chase of himself. Orchids falling apart in her and her hair, she and she alone with Scratch stood the fury of the storm, nay seemed to rise taller at its center, to become its very eye, the calm at the heart of the anger of wind. Vérité, maimed and reviled, twisting resentment's tighter coil, winding it around her stiff-pin leg, arms raised to the sky. She and she grew taller, till she and she were taller than the tallest palmettos, and Scratch Cat too, tall as a storm head. Her and her best clothes fell away in rags with her wispy mantle of pod-spun lace. As the slicked ebon fur of Scratch, her and her body gleamed in the rain, the scars of her previous master's torture glistening in light-cracks thrown bright across the sky.

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She and she did chant with caterwauling Scratch, their voices riding the wailing wind as a praise-song none of us knew, nor could we fathom her deep-throated tongue-babble, which yet rumbled with Scratch's purr to quiet our spirits, even as the winds and the waters were calmed. So the Uncle opened the waters to receive into the shadowy realm beneath the sea, where Baron Skull cannot ride, the souls of tawnies honored by lights borne on the backs of turtles. There beneath the waters all souls inhabit a single great HOUSE, the richness of which is not in possession of any worldly goods but in possession of the wisdom of all the world's people, which is shared by the dead and multiplied beyond mortal imagining. And she and she beat her breast and raised a cry for all the souls everywhere who were not already at peace. And fell as one dead into sleep.

Before the SUN had fully risen on the devastation of the cane fields, which even the privileged amanuensis, viz., myself, would sweat to clear, I, Pierre Baptiste, crept from my hut to discover Vérité asleep near the high-water line, sprawled upon the flotsam and jetsam with Scratch curled on her calm and naked breast. Around her had been raised several cairns of pebbles and garlic, and 'pon one of these had been erected a cross of sticks bound with vine. But no God would claim her yet!

I took my priest of a bride in my arms and carried her back to her house. There I deposited her on her mat and lay down beside her with Scratch, praying her fatigue would diminish any ire that she had been touched without granting leave. She opened, first her good eye, then the fearsome slit; it flashed wary, and her lips curled back. I must own I was truly afraid, for I had seen her powers. Moreover John Fish was counseling change of heart, as he were loathe to swim in chill and choppy waters; he prayed I would woo a more serene and warm-hearted wench. Yet I was unwilling as ever to expose myself to exploitation as breeder or cuckold,

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however impolitic I deemed it to thwart my master's will. So I hissed in the juju woman's ear my plan. We would live together as brother and sister, feigning a union that would protect and shelter us both. I enjoined her give me some sign when she had considered my offer, and I passed from her presence into dawn, even as Captain Tom was sounding on his conch-shell horn the call to work.

Not long after, Vérité approached me: "Fools," she muttered, "can know their minds. If the fly love the spider, it be not the spider's fault. I say 'Shoo!' Will you buzz still?"

Taking this for her consent, I bundled my small possessions in my blanket, so to repair to her house, that I might from thence look up through chinks in *her* daubed roof at her lace-hung sky. In short, I would take up my new ESTATE forthwith. But there came then Jean-François, whom the priest had sold eight baptisms, eight sprinklings of holy water. The upright fellow had taken each more to heart than the last!

"I beg you accept this protection. Put this orchid's root in your pouch and she cannot conjure against it. For I have paid Père Gouy good money to dip it in the sainted water three times, once for Gentle Jesus, once for Marie-Vierge-Belle-et-Jeune, once for Saint Michel. With this root you will have the triune blessing on the nuptials—yea, the full triune!"

In truth I owned I might need the testicular root. I hid it in the bundle I carried to her doorway. I fopped outside her hut, sheepish, indeed, for she came to meet me in a gala red dress, her head wrapped bright and festooned with lace, whilst I languished in my ordinary patched brown clothes.

"Crawl in like a worm, then, man? I will claim a true husband, or live in peace with Scratch as before."

Jean-François whispered, "Though you work in the big house, you are not too grand to dirty your hands. Now you must burn

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some limestone rock in a very hot fire of grape-vine wood. You must wash her dwelling inside and out with three waters mixed with ash, not forgetting the threshold itself, which you must paint, to make an ash-white lintel between the dirt floor of her house and the dirt of the yard. If you do not do this, you will not have a home."

"What? I labor in the yard?"

"Who are you," declaimed Jean-François, "to set yourself above the estate of a married man? If you will not turn your hand to the wedding work, no one will have you."

I knew the custom well enough. But I had proposed a charade to this spell-cooking termagant. Why did the witch insist on the ceremony? There were more treacheries in the world than I had known. Yet I stood with my bundle by her door. The women of the yard were huddling, conspiratorial, in bunches, covering their faces with their hands to shutter and reveal their laughter. And the driver Tom was there with a drink of rum for all the hands—three fingers all around. So the crafty Pélérine Vérité had bound me in the ropes of custom and expectation. Even the cat smirked, a condescending grimace at my expense. So I rolled up my sleeves and sweated to make some lime while Pélérine swept and swept again her yard with her broom of twigs, tracing cryptic signs in the dust. And when I had painted her house and her threshold, I dressed myself in my Sabbath suit, that mostly I wore to funerals. I made a garland of the brown-throated orchids, dripping pollen. I bowed to the woman I had chosen to wed and I gathered her twisted body in my arms. I lifted her with her wretched broom across the whitewashed threshold.

Yet I did not trust her, but greased my ears with pig fat and stuffed rags in my nostrils and up my arse. I lay awake through several nights, watching her carefully whilst Scratch wreaked havoc amongst the mice, to see if she crawled up into her nets on eight legs, or consorted with raw-bone lights, or sneaked out to

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catch and eat a black dog, or received any tusk, toothy visitor no human would dare to bed. Yet I found her sleep to be sound. She did not snore but breathed as mild and rhythmical as the meekest maid, as calm as Marie-Vierge Herself, her exhalations fruity and sweet. And so I permitted myself to slumber in the knobbly warmth of her body and did warm her with my own body's store of heat. And as night followed night and she fed me well, reserving my tidbits with those of Uncle and Scratch from the family plates, I came to count myself a canny fellow, who had a mind like a knife that cut two ways.

As for JOHN FISH, he learned pity where most of his kind grow complaisant in lust. For comeuppance had I chosen my wife, to foil Dufay's design that I be bred, for she had been burned inside with a poker, and hollowed out. In her belly naught but scar and grief. Yet she had not sewed herself up. John Fish could wriggle in, snubbing gentle against the scars, which he felt as a blind man feels a woman's face to know the lineaments of her passion. Ah! My wife's passion were one with her woe and mine, the sorrow of enslavement. I took her and wept, running the tips of my fingers over the scars on her face, mingling my tears with her own. Thus was tempered the arrogance of my position in the great house. And Pierre Baptiste became in his own eyes the more a man, covertly and perilously, as ever in the yard, though he got along for quite a while as FORTUNE'S GROOM. Ah, but the complaisant amanuensis who had clapped to his bosom a woman reviled as a twisted termagant, incapable of breeding, harbored still in his heart a SECRET VANITY that poisoned his tranquillity with yearning.

## PART THE FIFTH

### *The Sage and the Meemie Worm*



You have seen for yourself, Kind Reader, Pierre was an educated man, already a CORRESPONDENT, though by proxy, of the great BUFFON. By craft and subterfuge, the slave's safest means to any end, I fancied I worked my way closer to Montbard, where I would make myself so useful and agreeable, Buffon would wonder how he had ever supposed we slaves possessed, not the full flower, but merely the seed of virtue. Yet, save for excursions to the factor in Saint-Domingue, I had never been away from the master's estate. Though I had seen white men in bag wigs with embroidered waistcoats, I had never seen the likes of the prodigal who now returned from France, viz., PAMPHILE, whose foretop was pomaded so high he must carry his hat beneath his arm, whilst on his other arm he wore a ribboned muff such as I had only seen a woman wear, and seen but a woman walk with an umbrella for a stick or wear red shoes, and patches on the face. His effeminacy might have excited rumors he were a sodomite, had not a doctor of physic, a reliable person who had come on the packet with him, given the lie to the rumor Pamphile loved boys, though without putting it completely to rest.

“Now I would not credit rumors touching on the master’s son were they bandied in the jakes by perruquinado’d profligates straining over brandy-bloodied stools. Yet I have it from a learned man of sober deportment—a Bible-reading tea-imbiber, whose hair is dressed in a simple queue—(*Squint pats his neck-nape then puffs to light his pipe from a coal*)—our scion has sailed on the breeze of charges—considerable charges! For it seems he seduced a sweet-eyed seamstress, one Toinette, with promises she would be mistress of a great plantation (*a vasty gesture mapping the roundabouts*) which would come to him when his sickly old sire wheezed his last (*Squint, horribly wheezing*), which Pamphile looked to hear off the very next packet (*hand over heart, Squint gazes heaven-ward*).

“When the eminent heir gets his sugar-puss to a shabby room in the moldy inn where he be hiding from his tailor (*Squint cowers*), he bribes the drunken solicitor who greases with him the bed. (*Squint waves off a pest, then pulls at his shoes, leering all around.*) Pamphile locks the door and falls on the girl (*wiggles his toe through a hole in his stocking*), skewing her nose with his knuckles, opening cuts around the eyes which had not yet healed, as you see sirs, though she rubbed them with ash to keep them open. (*Squint digs knuckles into an eye-socket.*) Ha!

“The heir had ripped her petticoat—‘very new, of very good stuff, and the crewel work from my own hands’ (*Squint squeaking*)—ripped her bodice, ripped her chemise to tiny bits. Tsk! Tsk! Tsk! How could she ’scape, him? Was she to go naked in a poor, rough street of cut-purse lurkers and randy oglers? He had already let down his falls and stood with the ram aimed at the citadel door and the priest-hole behind. (*Squint threatens toward his falls.*) ‘Nay, the warcraft is antique, yet so he said, sirs, “citadel door and priest-hole behind.”’ And what could she, poor citadel, do? He tied her to the bed, then stuffed his cheesy stocking in her mouth. (*Squint swives the air with his foot.*) He would remove the gag but to ply her with sugared rum, doctored with poppy and

mandrigore, which so addled her wits and sapped her will, she scarce knew what she said or did, good sirs. (*Squint with hand on brow feigns a swoon.*) She had not the strength of a feather blown in the air (*fwoooo! Squint blows*) above a night-night pillow when the candle be puffed out.

“She had not been given dinner, only marzipan jumballs in the shape of numbers, which he forced down her throat so she would drop sugar, which he would eat so he could make numbers from the music of the spheres, as Pythagoras had (*Squint, squeaking the while*). ‘Nay, his very words, sirs: “Pythagoras,” though he said so with his eyebrow raised.’

“He wanted her to hear the music, too, and pulled out the gag to feed her her own sweet turds with his sticky hands. ‘None of your foolish dungy-mups, sir.’ No drug would make her so forget herself she would eat her own turds. If she would not, said Pamphile, she was a bad girl; he must beat her with his riding whip.

“‘And God in Heaven knows, I never expected he would,’ yet he did, she said, until she passed out from pain. ‘And my back is all scars, and who wants to look on me now? Who will marry me?’

“Not the eminent heir! The linen was nasty now (*Squint petulant*). He had no unsullied spot to take his ease. So he shrugged his shoulders—so she swore—and left her tied for the inn-keep to find, or the drunken solicitor, or his tailor come knocking with a bill.

“‘Mayhap he supposed she were dead,’ said the doctor. ‘An account of most appalling depravity’—his very words. Tom retails it for the moral, my buckos, the moral.”

In the yard we had our own tales of the EMINENT HEIR. ’Twas rumored his fish would not swim had it not first supped on the spectacle of a woman’s bloody back. ’Twas further rumored he fasted on cow- and pig-shaped jumballs all the days of Lent then dropped marzipan into the mouths of his father’s house girls,

whom he had dressed as nuns, which they had never seen (though Pierre had seen them in engravings in books), so they thought, poor girls, he had dressed them as vultures. And these pleasures Pamphile could enjoy without fear of reprisal in the shadow of the sword of Michel, patron saint of our plantation isle. His father had whipped his heir when he was young; now the elder had no recourse but to Reason, for Pamphile was larger than he, and stronger. And M'sieu could not permit his heir be disciplined by his slaves, nor suffer his being handed to the militia. So M'sieu drank more rum than before, and smiled in his cups—*all's well, all's well*. And Pamphile mollified his father with a first-hand account of the great BUFFON.

'Twere well-nigh impossible to credit the notion the rogue Pamphile had been invited to visit at his country estate the philosophe who had translated Newton into French. Then again, two watches bulged the fob pocket of Pamphile's breeches, which watches kept the time in the physical and metaphysical realms, of numbers and music, respectively, which watches, moreover, Pamphile consulted with an ostentatious frequency, pursing his lips so knowingly that even his father, who had read so many books, credited him with having learned, in France, something of the new philosophy, though he be too great a dolt to learn it well. Yet if Pamphile could make no credible pretense to learning, he could make a great one to posturing. For this capacity, mayhap, to present himself as an ornament, a human ormolu, or exotic plume, Pierre had inveigled himself, by preening and flattering, into the graces of the Sage of Montbard.

BUFFON, Pamphile recounted, was of less than average height, though erect and muscular, pompous and deliberate in manner, with bright white hair daily set in the crimpety, old-fashioned style by an all-too-confiding dresser, who retailed most

scandalous accounts of lust & vanity & diverse medleys of wickedness, whilst Buffon laughed in a hearty yet supercilious manner, his eyes popping like the eyes of a glutton who has spied an enormous roast.

“Do not picture him hunched as a scrivener over embryonic conceptions while the sun is climbing the sky”—here Pierre Baptiste cringes—“for he carries his notions in his head till he has got them fully fleshed”—here Pierre of the conjure house puffs himself up—“taking endless solitary turns along the fragrant paths of his garden, attired in a sumptuous dressing gown of yellow-and-white-striped stuff sprigged with the most exquisite blue flowers. (I have tried to have the work copied but ’twas too complex for the blind old whores who would trust me to pay.) Swaggering with his walking stick, our bold philosophe treads the mazy paths ’twixt his manicured beds, his hand on his hip, like so, regarding from the superb vantage of eighty thousand a year the shabby, sprawling jungle of flora and fauna that writhes and struggles outside his hedge. And daintily adjusting his sleeve ruffles, he composes his variations, dictating at intervals in perfect periods to his ever-patient secretary.

“He will not suffer anyone to beard him, in the musing, preoccupied hours of strolling and dictating, strolling and dictating, but waits ’til dinner to enjoy the company of his guests, who are dying of ennui, you may be sure. His horses are tame; no one he invites plays dice or cards or wagers even in jest. What a yawn! Précieuses and sycophantes mincing from chair to chair, trying their wit whilst sucking their snuff—he is the great cock among these hens, I swear.

“Into the room of gold and blue where his guests are sitting on the edges of their chairs, he makes a slow, grand entrance, a gliding sarabande. And lo, wasting not the time to call a servant, turns to close the door himself with discreet and delicate flourish, then turns to greet the assembly of twits.

"To those who attend his every word as grain-starved fowl some kernels of corn in the dust, he most graciously avows, 'Today have I composed some passages of the most sublime elegance,' winding his side curls around his little finger.

"Then does he read his draft to his guests, now squinting close to the page, now declaiming from memory, taking scrupulous note of the angle at which the meanest serving wench holds her ear to listen"—here Pierre winces at Pamphile's tone of cynical badinage—"even once asking the opinion of a dog, thereby much putting out the tail-wagging *abbé* who dogs him." (Here Pamphile snickers in his green-gold sleeve.)

Pierre would have wagged his tail as Buffon's dog, his dogged anonymous secretary, eyeing from the shadows the long-waisted pink and yellow dowagers primly packing their cheeks with snuff as the great man paces, a noble actor turning and turning to display his best-made side.

"It is well known," Buffon declares, "that in the matter of testimony by witnesses the assertion of two possible witnesses to the effect that they have seen something constitutes completely acceptable proof, whereas the testimony of a thousand or ten thousand negative witnesses, who merely assert that they have not seen something, suffices only to produce a slight doubt."

Pierre yearns to be present, to cry "Astonishing! Wonderful! Quintessentially marvelous!" He might dare suggest the great one refine a point, invert a phrase, to more vivid effect. In this way he would assert his superiority to his station, while flattering the sage.

My hopes were of a mythic ASCENT, like a god in a chair in a tragedy, such a divinity as one sees in the frontispiece of "Chloëthon," rising to a heaven occupied by Buffon and his correspondents, where conversation be an engaging and dramatic alternation of repartée and tirades, such as might have been written for ideal nobles of noble ideals, illustri unmoved by rude

considerations, viz., lust & greed & gluttony, who desire only to increase the stock of knowledge and beauty in the world.

Would I not make a more elegant sycophant than the bald, lame Abbé Bexon, hobbling behind the great one, bobbing his fat round head, whining and begging “to be the one allowed to assert, before all others, my conviction before almighty God the present Author were a greater master of rhetoric and substance than any man who had ever lived, unless the King should turn his hand,” & cetera? Fie on such fooforal unctions! Consider with what dignified courtesy I would have removed the great one’s napkin from his neck, looking for the moment to mention my own shadow histoire, the people’s accounts of Guinée, of transportation, & of bondage, the accounts stored in the conjure chest in the memory house, so all that was lost in field and yard be preserved. For my contribution to the completeness of knowledge, might I not look to be promoted, from napkin-tucker, to scribe, to secretary, to under-savant, to savant, to philosophe, to auteur, with no duties to perform but to think? So I was wont to lose myself in reverie, standing behind my master’s chair with his napkin over my arm.

And so my Vérité found herself saddled with a useless SAVANT, who did not maintain the thatch or hoe yams or set snare for finch, except as badgered by Jean-François and by Squint, yet who ate from her bowls and beseeched her to drape around his neck, before he supped, the scrap of sacking that was his napkin, to stand behind him as he ate and wait on him, so his manners would gentle.

“Bare. Bare. Look down his nose at lice in our hair. With so much puff in him, how can he walk on the ground? Brass-buttons! Lace cravats! Will fancy-mince roll me in flour? Off to the tailor’s, he says. Stand when I enter the room, he says. I sweat eau de mille

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fleurs; never step out of my chamber unless in my periwig; in the privy, drop roses of sugar.”

Yet when Pélérine discovered an itch in her savant’s side, an infection of the hideous MEEMIE-WORM, which afflicted the green boys from the tanks, she patiently dug out its head with a knife, having pacified Pierre with rum steeped in a bitterwood cup—Quassi’s tea, that did poison the worm. She nailed its cursed head to a twig and twisted the twig a number of times each day, for several days, wrapping the worm around it, until the nasty creature was pulled from its suppurating burrow under my skin. She spat tobacco juice on the wound to purify it, then dropped the worm in boiling water, to murder it body and soul. She unrolled its corpse to a grim, ghastly length of four feet, dried it, chopped it, and pounded it to dust. She wrapped a pinch of this dust in a shred of cloth from an old satin coat of M’sieu’s, with lime, & lye, & a vulture’s eye, & a worm made of sugar, that looked as my meemish persecutor had looked, and placed this packet in my talisman pouch, to protect me from the meemie worms, the revenge of Guinée for SWOLLEN PRIDE.

Later she dug up a paddle, carved in the shape of a turtle with the face of a man, she had buried under her bed, so no one would find it who searched her house for juju tricks. Rubbing the belly of the turtle with a small, flat stone, she sang in a low, sweet voice a song I had not heard before:

N’go-la-la ha-i-né  
B’wa pa-d’ma ha-i-né  
N’go la n’d’ha-i-né

This was a song in his tongue she had learn’t from a frail old man on Ravenal’s place, who had not enough words in the common speech to translate. Yet the strength of the words were an amulet

that exerted its power from mystery. Always, if a person who sang this song rubbed the stone against the belly of the man-headed turtle, in the way the rubbing had always been done, lights appeared in the branches of the trees. Just so, the peaceful dead emerged from the sea, the shadow the past would cast on the future. When she saw these lights—and truly they came, for I saw them myself—she shook a gourd she kept hidden under her skirts. Squatting in the light of the cooking fire, she slowly tilted the gourd. From a hole near its top there rolled onto the ground the cowries with which she divined, and falling silent among them, the fragile dry body of a horned beetle, yet without his horns.

When she saw the precise manner in which that headless, hornless bug had fallen amongst the shells, she started, and shivered, and gazed at me sideways, and shook her head.

“Visitor up from the region of forgetting. Don’t ask! Among open mouths he shakes down darkness. You suck an orange, fool of wrong wind. Tragedy is high game. How many nipples and how many toes? Sugar fire burn his clothes off, invisible his bones. Visitor. No mouth knows his name. Visitor! Shhhhhh!”

One by one she dropped the cowries back into the gourd, but the beetle she left on the ground, only drawing a circle around it. She would not say what she had seen, but busied herself hiding the wooden turtle, which was the paddle we used to start the rafts of the dead out to sea. Then she took some yams we had been saving to break our fast and laid them before the hungry lights in the trees. Ever after, did I mention Buffon or my shadow *histoire*, she shook her head. Did I look to the day when my fidelity had earned my freedom, or muse on the house in an orange grove I would dwell in then, she chuckled grimly.

For my part, I took the lights in the trees for the torches of maroons, whom chance had brought from some other isle to see what

they could steal, yet I was discomfited by my wife's prophetic intimations, which had hatched in my innards a brood of doubts which did consume me under my skin.

Yet I often woke at night to find she watched me as I slept; she would stroke my brow and rub my shoulders, soothing me to slumber, as if I had been a child. Did I but pass my hand across my brow, she hastened to brew me Quassi's tea. And I saw she meant me very well. Her twisted body spoke a word of my god-mothers' alphabet, spelling "tenderness" in their tongue. In time she unfolded HER TALE.

When she had been a gay, quick girl, her old master, Ravenal, of Saint-Hildebert, had taken her across the sea to be schooled as a cook, both ordinary and fine, and moreover as a sugar baker, to construct subtleties of almond paste mixed with rice, & scented waters, & various gums. And in the tangible closeness of travel he had taken her into his bed, hedging the expense of finding her. Once in Paris she had a cap with kissing strings and patched her face and went arm-in-arm with her master. She had an apron of lace as finely made as the greatest lady's, and rosettes on her shoes as large. She talked freely with all and soon surmised that under the laws she could not be held in bondage inside France. Yet rather than fleeing she told Ravenal she would fain take leave to seek her fortune. Whereupon he fell to his knees and wrung his hands in her apron and wet her petticoat with his tears, begging her not to desert him, rolling his eyes most piteously. He was accustomed to her presence, he allowed, weeping copiously, besotted with passion, said he, pawing the muff she wore on her sleeve, moreover most bitterly mindful he had spent a fortune in training her to bake gilt sugar pies filled with live frogs that he might shew our islands as refined in the use of our own products and their subsequent manufactures, as any capital of Europe. She owed him a successor, that she must train from among her fellows; when she

had indulged him thus, he would release her with perfervid gladness. And this most sweet and reasonable entreaty did sway her. Moreover she pitied his pock-marked face, which the white girls mocked behind their fans.

Vérité returned with Ravenal to Saint-Hildebert. There she taught the people, not only spectacle, viz., a sugar stag that bleeds claret when its side is pierced, though she had never seen a stag, but delectations to tease Ravenal's palate. She confided the rule for peppercorn paté, for tarragon sauce & for duck's-foot pudding, and later gave herself over to please a certain sugary little wife, who had very black teeth, and coughed up blood, and was rumored to have been sent on the packet boat, in the hold with some hounds. And Vérité taught that drab the use of sesame seeds & red pepper, that she might please her husband. Yet despite all Vérité's most pleasant compliance, when she went to her master to remind him of his promise to free her, averring she had fulfilled her part of the bargain most richly, he chuckled in his sleeve ruffle. "Now," he said, "we are home."

"Toad eye in his stew! And droppings of birds in the bread dough! His I spoil and his and spoil! And the little blue shoes of his little blue wife!"

Still faithless Ravenal bade Vérité come to his bed. Though she cursed and reviled him, he did but chortle and slap her, the heat of his temper increasing the heat of his passion. He tied her and took her like an animal, from the rear. He tore her gowns from spite and gave her uncouth smocks of coarse stuff that barely covered her knees. She fled into a swamp to be chased by plashing, barking hounds; shivering in the water, she betrayed herself with a sneeze and was driven home on a lead like an unruly horse he would break to his will. She began lifting her smock above her head in every corner, giving herself freely to the newest hands, desperate, sad men who did not speak a language she knew and gnashed their teeth in their sleep.

“Suffer them—on me. Let them crawl from the holds and jump for meat. Alas! Too high! Hung too long and covered with flies born from what crawls in the flesh. And who will have the bones, the bones, who will have the bones?”

When she gave birth, she smothered the babe as soon as she had bitten through the cord. She trussed its arms and legs tight and snug, and she stuffed it with sausage and leek, with plenty of lardons under the skin and a bitter manchineel apple in its mouth. And she entrusted it to no-one but turned it on the spit herself, in the middle of the night, when all the household were in bed. And when the skin was crackling and crisp, she set the roast on the bottom crust of a sugar pie-shell, with roasted finches all around. And when the top crust was nearly baked, she released under its dome forty-eight live finches, and baked them in. And she showed it herself before her master’s company table, raising the platter high above her head and smiling when the guests praised the flight of singing birds that soared above their silent brothers. Then she cut the pie to nice bits and set the platter down in front of her master and his ringleted wife with a sauce of saffron and clove.

“So, Mistress, eat! I have already tasted.”

But the lady saw a little hand, and she began to moan and pray. And the master heaved upon the table, though the provenance of the roasted meat was obscured in the brown of its crispy coat. Were it her master’s brat the cook would not say, yet though Ravenal seized the whip from his overseer and flogged her himself till her flesh hung in strips from her back. *She would not say whose the babe*, though with his own hands he rubbed her with salt till she fainted. *Would not say whose babe* though he rolled her in molasses and dusted her with golden pollen he had bidden the people, under pain of lashing, shake on her from those cursed orchids. *Would not say* though he tied her arms around a rail and hung her

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in the sun, sticky and wounded and gleaming, to be tortured by the feet and mouths of ants.

She was guarded by several half-shamed ragged little whites of the militia and some zealous house yellows hissing and taunting her for the privileges she had previously claimed. Ravenal gave orders to leave her hanging while the sun crossed the sky and slipped into the ocean. Unless she say whose the babe, she would be given no food or drink.

And her guards knew she never would say and did not like these duties, for they feared the smell of her blood would bring rats and dogs and pigs and vultures, and they would have to fight them off. For the master had fancied the girl; though he be angry he would not want her body gnawed. Oh, he should have paid them more, for what they had to do. They sent one of their number to petition for rum and said they would leave their posts if they did not get all they wanted. They swore they drank to keep themselves awake, then passed out one by one; soon they were all asleep.

When clouds veiled the moon, some Xuacomac crept past the dozing guards to fill Vérité's mouth with sweet, fresh water and to press healing leaves on her wounds. And these solicitous friends cut the ropes that held her body and lowered her to the ground, where they made a ring of white pebbles around her, to keep the insects away. They prodded her awake to show her their sign, a peg driven into the ground, its upper end wedged into a split twig to form a tall triangle. She must make this sign wherever she was and so solicit their protection. Yet though she begged them, they did not take her away. They could not, for they were dead; her time had not yet come. And this began her instruction in the ways of those who serve Uncle God.

When her master found her on the ground in the morning, he whipped her guards, even the white ones.

He pulled her out of the ring of pebbles to draw his smoking iron down one side of her face.

"Now men who see the fine profile will yearn to cosset you as I did, but they will flee from the side that is ugly. You will know what it is to be mocked and scorned."

He forced his sullen servants to tie her arms and legs to pegs. While his iron heated once again to red, he jumped on her arms and legs, driving down hard with the heels of his boots, though—'midst so many curses a meager blessing—but one of her legs were broke. Then he drove his hot iron up inside her.

"Now are you branded above and below," he said. "Now I will sell you, not for a cook, but for a hand, to some impoverished planter whose kitchen is one rude pot he throws some birds in. Like as not he will work you to death in his rocky fields, for your face is frightful and your limbs are crack-broke. And I will have it cried from the block your womb is spoiled, have it cried right out, though it lower your price."

But when she came on the block, Ravenal's coachman slipped a word to a postilion of our M'sieu, allowing this twisted, barren creature were a trained cook and a baker of subtleties in sugar, worth a very high price, save for Ravenal's wish for revenge. And she could be kept in the kitchen, so her disfigurement would not repulse the guests . . . and think of her gratitude, not to be sold to a pauper . . . and the savings to your M'sieu, the prestige of his table. "Yet I do not wish to deceive; he must have the dishes tasted."

Our M'sieu did suffer a poor client bid her low for him, to flout Ravenal, and bought Vérité for his estate, to boss his kitchen, and bake him jumballs in the shapes of fauna & flora, and kiss his buckled feet.

"The press-down kettle weight the fly-stuck eye the skull they think cover all is grass, is grass, and smoke groan over the paving stones they have vaunted up—HA! I am patience, circle-hawk the

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coop, the chickens egg-cracked. So be. So. World spider come to us with tongue-twisted gut rope, smoke-red eyes—I will not be daunted down, will not be flaunted round. You cannot come without say-so. Who say so? Me. In my place, chink-spying all the sky say cry, cry, cry that ember in the stubble. Cinder and ash have whited him, but blow a little past his heart, he catch, he catch, and glow red and black. My talk falls one word dropping after another, rain blurring light. *Iroson*. Still all is rain.”

Head patted, tears sopped, nose and arse wiped: my entire life I had known but the kindness of women. So many nursing mothers suckling me with their own babes, warmed my marrow with their own bones’ warmth, their voices flowing like molasses:

Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to  
Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa ba-lu-ba wa!

Slung by day on the backs of cane-cutting women, by night passed among their huts, a cosseted child had grown to a cosseted man, a Goody who thrived on the careful ministrations of the female sex. Oh la la! So heartily did I believe in the KINDNESS OF WOMEN, I could not be convinced my wife be wicked, even when she told me she had murdered her child, for she had pulled the meemie from my side.

Yet her sleep were troubled with a haunting visitant, viz., the specter of the roasted infant, its flesh falling in hideous cutlets from its ribs. From the mouth of this piteous haunt there issued a whinny, a wail, a bleat, as if it cried out its suffering and laid it at her feet. When she woke up moaning, stuffing her fists in her mouth to stop her groans, I rocked her stiff and sob-wracked body in my arms as an affrighted child, singing her to sleep with her own lullaby:

Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to.

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Pélérine Vérité—didn't she name herself, then? Before she was mutilated and came to Dufay's, she was called Beauty, a name Ravenal had given as well to one of his cows, so that, to distinguish between the woman and the cow, they called her Beauty-Girl or even Beauty-Strumpet. Yet she was not distinguished from the cow in all respects, for, like cattle, we slaves were branded on the shoulder, and this were true even on Dufay's estate. But only Beauty-Girl Ravenal branded all over her body, as to say it belonged all to him, cow and cow again, though she would not be cowed. Like a baptized sinner, she stepped reborn from her bath in her babe's blood and her own. She would answer only to "Pélérine Vérité." And she crocheted for herself a tucker and neckerchief from cobweb strands, so she covered the neck of her chemise. And she crocheted a pinner with lappets that sat pert and pretty on her head. So they could not prevent her dressing herself dainty and carrying herself with grace, like a lady.

Her murder of her helpless babe I charge to the wretched institution, SLAVERY, which has hideously deformed the natural goodness of so many sons and daughters of Guinée, even as the iron had scarred to a twisted, close-eyed leer one whole side of my Pélérine's face, one whole side of the organ of expression, in which the volatile lips would otherwise curve a full arc and straighten a full line; the full forehead wrinkle; two delicate nostrils expand and contract; and two eyes, the soul's lanterns, flicker and flare, sparkle and again be shuttered. One whole side, full half her expressiveness, seared and ruined! Was my wife to blame for these afflictions? To rape her with a hot iron had been a cruel revenge for the child's death, that had been revenge in turn. Yet though the iron had scarred her pudenda, a sweetness did well up from within her that belied her MISERABLE HISTORY, WHICH, the more I contemplated, the more I distrusted my own good fortune, to work in the big house, so close to the whites.

Though M'sieu had rescued Pélérine, I blamed him for Rave-nal's cruelty. M'sieu, too, owned and used a silver iron. To M'sieu's benefit there turned a mill that had crushed whole men, and, yes, our M'sieu had sold their pulp with the rum, and re-fused to sieve them out, so their grieving widows had no shred to send into the wave. Oh, this same M'sieu, guileless at his easel, filling an outline with chalk or wash, come nightfall joined his friends in revelry, planter among planters, white among whites. Oh then I saw Baron Skull!

His eyes glittered through the master's chiding slits as he gave me for my wedding gift (on the grounds my wife would feed me from the kitchen) not the garden that was customary, but a cast-off hat, only a little frayed at the edges, & breeches, & a coat, which would have lent more dignity to my new estate had they been fur-nished with buttons or laces.

Yet I disguised my resentment as a servant must. I bore myself with the stolid mien that was meet for my station. As I could stand so quiet with my back to a wall for so many hours, waiting to change the plates or trim the wicks, M'sieu did frequently charge me to attend him when his friends assembled. And though I loathed that porcine company of sots, I feigned impassivity, not only to avoid punishment, but to hear of the world, retailed in gossip over cards. And my curiosity regarding the great Buffon, whose prose had so ravished my heart, was richly fed by prodigal Pamphile, who warmed to his father's urging and fleshed out his relation.

Pamphile recounted the various IRON BALLS which BUFFON was rumored to have roasted in his oven, till they were red-hot, to be fondled by a number of blushing girls, with soft hands, who must describe the diverse sensations, of burning and pain, they felt upon handling balls of a number of sizes and compositions, their cries and their exclamations recorded by Bexon, and all so

Buffon might extrapolate from these small iron globes to determine the epoch of the formation of the planets and calculate the cooling time of the terrestrial globe, whether there be truth in Newton's revision of Archbishop Ussher's determination, that Creation had occurred on twenty-sixth October, in the year 4004, before the Christian era, at nine o'clock in the morning. These IRON BALLS put the company in mind of diverse LEWD JESTS, which M'sieu insisted they forebear repeating in the house with a lady present, for his wife had not yet gone to bed.

"Oh, we will not be heard above the pianoforte," Pamphile insisted.

A minuet rushed and mangled did score his point, yet M'sieu demurred, for there had been slurs on the character of a well-born, honest gentleman, namely, Buffon: while it were well known that the balls had been forged and tested, to determine the time they took to cool, it were scurrilous to claim that the test had been made on the hands of girls.

"And were the truth established on their buttocks, then?" cried a fellow.

And M'sieu threw up his hands, and left it to Pamphile to repeat a number of hoary canards, having to do with the character, & behavior, & predilections for diverse spheroid phenomena, of women of various sizes, & shapes, & ages, & degrees of comeliness. To hear this dilation the guests leaned in close, so that Pierre, against the wall, heard but a murmur, punctuated by an occasional guffaw or expostulation, viz.:

"Breasts so large?"

"What did she think was between her legs?"

"How did he train them to bring their daughters? Did they fail to sell 'im their wives?"

"Ten years old? Oh fie! A woman's worth nothing under twelve."

To which last a member of the company rejoined that a woman improved with age, like cheese, but not indefinitely. And another allowed that a seasoned widow, with domestic experience and ten thousand a year, might make an excellent wife, for though the face might wrinkle and the teeth rot, that part of an honorable woman which only a husband sees, remains quite ripe.

"And besides, the bitch is grateful."

M'sieu looked up and raised his eyebrows, looking with his odd round eyes past my countenance to the wall, as was the custom of the whites. Ever the philosophe, he said not a word, but sat with the fingertips of one hand leaning against the fingertips of the other, musing on a point.

Then Pamphile plucked my sleeve.

"And tell me, Goody, are the private parts of the black bitch as durable as those of a white?"

I was very little accustomed to address by a white in any particular that did not command my service. Only from my current vantage is it apparent there had been no reply to his question that preserved me from appearance of trespass. Yet the presumption I must reveal my passions as a dog will lick his testicles, in the presence of those who mock him, enraged me. Between gritted teeth, then, I replied I had not his basis to make the comparison.

"Ooh la, la, la," the company breathed.

Pamphile reddened and raised his hand to strike me, but M'sieu held him.

"My son—" the master chuckled—"you have gone too far with our Goody, to goad him to pert speech, for he is patient and mild, though he will try me—! Will try me—!" He waggled his finger and shook his head, as if reproaching a willful child. "Will marry a wench the world knows be barren—naughty, naughty Goody! Oh, well he knows the parts of a woman be fragile! Yet though he stubbornly flout my wish in the matter of breeding, withal he is docile,

and very patient and accurate in his work, for which it cost me to train him, my son—a point to bear in mind when you flare up. I have had this Goody since he was a boy. In all that time, his eye has never flashed rebellion. I would not put down a good dog that bit but once. No more will I see my loyal and useful servant put down, which he must be if you goad him to fight, my son—must be. So for the peace and prosperity of our plantations, I pray you, desist. For even these niggers have feelings.”

Cut again by sympathy, though saved from a beating, Pierre gritted his teeth. Moreover, he had been moved to ponder the estate of WOMEN, and particularly of BONDED WOMEN TRANSPORTED FROM GUINÉE. Mind you, he would not inhabit an amazon realm where men waited on women, yet he could not walk by a godmother straining to haul a bucket up from a well. Had the masters no pity for these chattel creatures, their daughters, sisters, nurses, & toss-wenches? Must they be worked as animals and taken as animals, their chastity and modesty of no more account than a cow’s?

For all his impudent queries, Pamphile had been nursed at the same breasts as I; he had drunk with his nurses’ milk the stories of Guinée, stories as old as the beginning, when the world was a denseness of trees—no fields or pastures or fences or barns or human works of any kind—and from these stories he might have learned a better measure of the sorrows of the world.

NOW IN WILDERNESS DAYS, there were no gardens, for every tree bore sweet-tasting fruit, and the leaves of the plants were tender yet piquant. The very first man was invited for a while to sojourn in those forests that had no paths. He slung his hammock wherever he wished, for the trees were so close together he needed no roof to keep out rain. Day and night, he made up

riddles and stories and danced dizzy circles around himself. He sauntered and strolled, all the while chewing, with leaves hanging from his mouth. And the cheeks of the very first woman beside him bulged with fruit. They reached and stooped to eat and napped whenever they liked, and their laughing shook in the leaves of the trees.

Yet not long before they had known only mud, for their mother was the goddess Damzillah, Water-She-Earth-She, lissome and sly, Damzillah, Whom Her brother, the God Uncle, tore apart, smashing Her ribs and ripping them out, then cutting off Her head. He threw Her consort Chenwiyi down into the endless waters that surround the world, where He drowned and was lost.

Oh, that Damzillah was tricky! She was hotter than a rat! She lay with Chenwiyi, Her own son, and from this union—this squalid coupling—children were born in mud, First Man and First Woman, brother and sister. Born in mud, they wallowed in mud, and from their muddy passions descended a taint, their weakness and ours, yet they knew no shame. Indeed, they sported and frolicked and blissfully lolled in the mud, though there was little to eat but bits of root they dug with sticks. Still, they crowned each other with hats of dried, sunbaked mud. They painted each other's bodies with mud. They wallowed and nuzzled and snorted and rutted, yet they did not forget the blood and grief of their mother's death.

As the sun went down each day, First Man and First Woman rained tears into puddles around their feet. With sticks they drew in the mud the outline of their mother's torn, ribless body. They twirled their sticks and made a fire by Her, to keep Her warm, and took turns feeding it until the sun came up. And their piety shamed the God Uncle. He beat His breast and wept.

"Pray, what is a little incest?" He cried. "When I Myself was the father of Her son and indeed, there was no-one but Him for Her to marry? As for these muddy children—orphans, alas! Orphans!"

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The God Uncle vowed He would make restitution. He would lead Damzillah's children from the mud to His wilderness realm, where they would enjoy an abundance of food that fell into their hands. He would anoint their foreheads with drops of His holy blood-red semen. Their lives would never end if only they humored Him in one small matter dear to His heart. They were not to pick the red-and-yellow fruit of the en-na-a-na tree, which was the Uncle God's food.

First Man said he would obey, and the woman said she would too, but only the man was telling the truth, for the woman was distracted. A little worm, like a meemie worm, had crawled in her ear from the en-na-a-na tree, where it lived, and oh, it nibbled, nibbled, nibbled! A little curling, insinuating worm, ash-white, like the bones of skeletons bleaching in sunlight. The nibblety gnawing of the worm's tiny teeth made First Woman restless; restlessness made her covetous. She walked about and walked about, eyeing the en-na-a-na tree that was the God Uncle's, yet First Man did not have the wit to worry. The woman was growing bigger, swelling up like a kinkwi melon. The man could see she was discomfited, her body changing her every day, her shoulders carried further back as her belly advanced. He wanted to help her, so he asked what he could do.

"Pray, pick me some of that en-na-a-na fruit," she said.

"Uncle says 'No,'" he said.

She cried so hard then! Oh, didn't she cry! She stamped her feet and screwed up her eyes and wept and screamed and allowed that First Man must be calling on another woman, though there were not other women in the world yet. She sulked so, and bawled so, and pouted so, First Man felt most brought down. He would have done anything to calm that woman. He ran to the en-na-a-na tree and tore off some fruit. He even peeled it for her, digging his fingernails into the smooth red-and-yellow skin. They ate the sweet pink flesh together, then they hid the tattle-tale peels

beneath a mound of earth. They brushed leaves over the mound so it was hidden from view.

But Uncle had been sending wind to blow around the man and the woman, to skirl up their secrets. And the wind blew the leaves up from the mound of earth that covered the pile of peels, just lifted the leaves for a moment, but Uncle saw that fresh mound of earth. He sent a stronger wind to blast the mound, and the wind bared a few bright peels—only a few. But the Uncle saw. Oh! Wasn't He a whirlwind of fury! He was in a passion!

He whirled around the woman, twirled and spun around and around her.

"You broke your promise, and you lured the man to break his. Now I'm going to punish you. I'm kicking you out of this wilderness where the trees so kindly furnish your food. You will live in the mud forever now, but without the innocence of children. No more lolling and wallowing! Both of you will know what it is to work hard. You will dig in fields and hunt for food from dawn to dusk. You will crouch for shelter from rain in houses with roofs that leak. You will no longer bear on your foreheads the mark of my holy blood-red semen, so you will no longer live forever, but sicken and die. And you, woman—that baby of yours will hurt you coming out, and all your other babies too. Your life will be one long trail of cries and blood. You will walk behind the man you betrayed, and wait on him, and serve him, and do whatever he wants. You will fall asleep still working, while the man at the end of the day will rest, and smoke his pipe, and sing a song while he taps his fingers on his drum. And this will be true forever."

Then the Uncle went away. Only a small chameleon quivered in the sun where He had been, its color changing from green to the brown of dust. And afterwards, everything was just as the Uncle had said, for First Man and Woman, and for their children. They dug in the mud for roots and looked and looked to find fruit. When they found it, it was not the juicy, fragrant, sweet en-na-a-na,

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but the small, hard, tart siki-siki, the grief plum. And the siki-siki were all too often wormy. First Man and First Woman sighed and ate around the worms, but so little fruit had been left unspoiled! They were hungry all the time. Their son Ba-Wa was born so hungry he swallowed the fruit worms whole, ugly, squirming, slimy and white—tempter worms, like meemie worms. And Ba-Wa's sister-wife ate them too. And from eating those worms, the brother and sister turned white, like sun-bleached bone, and their hearts turned to bone. And when the two had eaten their fill, Ba-Wa killed more worms, and tied them together, and made a whip, and drove his darker brothers and sisters to work, so his bone-white wife could sit with him, feet up, and smoke a pipe and sing songs and tap her fingers on a drum, as men do.

And ever since Ba-Wa made his worm-whip, the white woman does no work, not even for her man. And the dark woman hoes and seeds the mud and pounds the yams for everyone. And when we are all sleeping under our palm-leaf roofs, and it rains, and the roof leaks, the white woman calls to the dark one, "Come and repair my roof. The fronds are not laid properly, one against another. The rain is trickling in."

The dark woman moves through the rain in the night into the white woman's house. She raises her arms to repair the roof, and the sweet fragrance of her body washes over the hard white bone man lying in his hammock. Memory stirs in him, memory of the days and the nights beneath the en-na-a-na tree. And he groans and reaches for her, and he takes her while his hard, white bone wife listens with her hands over her ears. Hard as she is, she is not hard enough for this. She cannot stand it. She feels in the dark for the worm-whip, and she lashes the dark woman out of her house, out into the mud and the rain and the night. Then the bone woman ties her husband into his hammock with the worm-whip. She rides him, her pelvis clattering against his bone-bone thing, *clacketa, clacketa, clacketa*. She must ride him a long time before he

squirts his seed, which does not want to grow in her body. That is why the white children grow harder and harder hearts, each generation harder than the last. Someday soon a stone generation will lie still-born in the cradles. Then the people will be free of BA-WA'S CURSE. And there is the proof, some say, the God Uncle has not forgotten us, Damzillah's children, the children of mud and anger and tears, His own. But meanwhile, the white man is calling the black woman, calling her, calling her, whenever the white woman turns her back. And M'sieu, not so very bad a man, not so very at all, gave birth to a son like Pamphile, who would spit on any story with a god in it.

PAMPHILE mocked all Gods, not only ours. He were no disinterested atheist, but styled himself GOD'S SUPERIOR though he would not write pamphlets or give sermons or make any public cause. He had determined to do what he pleased, on the grounds that religion be a bore, conscience be a plague, morality & duty be torture. If there be any God, opined the eminent heir, this Deity be a workman tinkering with the mechanism that drives the engine; an ingenious hurdy-gurdy man building then winding up a music box, letting it play down while humans, poor enchained apes, caper and jig. Belike this God pays no attention to the peccadilloes of Pamphile, opined the eminent heir. So let him have one girl squat on his rod while he chewed the beard of another, the more girls the better, and boys, as long as the frolic-jades were sweet and clean.

And why, Pamphile asked, did his father fear God? Precious de Buffon's philosophy showed the world had formed, not all at once, but over time, expatiated the eminent heir, ever cooling and degenerating. And Buffon might have taken back all his degenerative heresy when pressed by bullies in well-powdered wigs, hinting. He was a hypocrite, as they all were, all the careful old men frightened—still!—by the fates of Galileo and Bacon. The old

men wrote letters and debated truth and published CONSIDERED VIEWS and VAST COLLATIONS OF ALL THAT BE KNOWN but only within bounds of prudence, with pusillanimous prefaces, so as not to affront the priests, that the careful old philosophers might keep their estates and their fortunes and not be burned at the stake or broken on the wheel or confined to prison, where their teeth would rot and their bones be mildewed.

But let us not, Kind Reader, dignify any further the drunken slanders of Pamphile. Let us anatomize his religion, if we can call it such.

Pamphile's Pythagorean Deity had been degraded to the status of ITINERANT MUSICIAN, the music of the spheres to mechanical plinking of pins on a drum, whose timbres the ever more cynical Son of Land and Negroes reveled in, as a curiosity, yet for which he owed no more gratitude or reverence than had God thrown on the ground before Pamphile some pence he might pick up or leave, coins representing weights and numbers he would turn to music, music he would turn to coins, music refined in the manufacture, as sugar is refined, shat out the arse of a world-de-vise, a world-organ, mayhap shot out the arse of the Hurdy-Gurdy God Himself—*what time is it? In the physical and the metaphysical realms, what time?*

Yet who could offer proof Pamphile's God be less true than the God of M'sieu, viz., the Christian God served by Père Gouy, or even than Uncle God, whom so many acknowledge to be a God of the Tawnies, a God who came from them to us?

In the yard 'twere whispered Rose had had a Tawny father, and maybe others had had Tawny progenitors. 'Twere whispered that the Uncle God were born from a Worm that did impregnate Itself, then bore through the sky, wiggling and wiggling, till It got to the Moon, where It built Itself a sugar house, "like the Chinese temple on the tea caddy in the pantry." Some said God be a huge

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woman Whose eyes light the world in the dark and Whose voice rumbles thunder. Some others, God be a blue-black man taller than the tallest tree, Who would redeem us when He walked across the sea from Guinée, though they could not say when that would be. If He were coming from Guinée, He would have come with us, said the skeptics. In these Anduves, God must be a white man, a very big, very hairy one, with a very long beard that curls into clouds just above the earth. When He is angry, His beard darkens. He gavottes in old-style galligaskins, yes, pulls His breeches very high and farts crows out their flapping bottoms. Then storms roll over us, the winds blow down the houses, lightning strikes thieves and liars and shirkers. And God does not sit down again till someone runs for Père Gouy, who sprinkles holy water into the billows. Then God unfastens His falls; He pulls out His huge wormy cock and He pours His seed on the ground, and cane grows.

Pierre Baptiste reserved his judgment upon the ultimate NATURE OF DEITY. Savant that he was, he pondered such questions, his scrap of sacking tucked into the frayed neck of his shirt, while his wife served him dainties snatched from the master's pots. And the tenderness of her care for him undid his toughest, most stoic intentions. For despite the sober calculation of his marriage Pierre had come to CARE FOR HIS WIFE. Breathing in nights sweeter than mangos, he wept as the sun came up, glad he had lived another day. Black or white or tawny, a man is not given a long time to live; the sweetness slips between his fingers as water; he cannot hold it. Sweet life, cruel death! Pierre would never have coveted Master's wife though that one had her bodice laced and unlaced in his presence, while Pierre looked carefully to the ground directly in front of his toes that poked from his wrong-sized hand-me-down shoes. "Remember your human dignity," he

murmured under his breath, reproaching her, to no avail, with those immortal words of Voltaire, "*Souviens-toi de ta dignité d'homme.*"

I do not deny that I pitied MADAME, nor do I deny I would have helped her, more than she had asked, by breaking her of reading fancy-tales, which habit so addled her wits and so exacerbated her husband's temper. Alas! HER FIERY PASSION FOR FANCY was not to be quenched by any damp advice of mine. Kind Reader, you will recall, I durst not reveal the extent of my own passion for reading. Pierre must stand in the stiff silence of stifled disapprobation upon discovering that Madame had sneaked to the library shelves once again in search of Arcadian idylls. For the dalliance of furbelowed pastoral swains, she neglected her stewardship of house and yard, while she read through and through again the few fanciful tales in our collection. She had exhausted the shepherds and shepherdesses, and all the fairy royalty, and indeed, she had read "Beauty and the Beast" a hundred times. Moreover, she had swapped philosophy from the master's shelves for yearnings and sighs from the shelves of the neighbors, hiding the swaps in her sleeves. Thus, she could sigh for perfect-mannered princes in day's nooks and evening's crannies, leaving M'sieu to mourn lost ethics and vanished cosmogonies, gnashing his teeth and tearing what hair remained on his head, threatening to flog Pierre for thieving or negligence. Indeed, Madame knew little more of any serious subject than the ten-year-old child Pamphile's whispers had linked with Buffon. (How that great man, who bandied sallies with wasp-waisted précieuses, could choose for his consort a stripling child, who lisped her catechism—ah, the best of the whites were goosey, indeed.)

Young Madame did read for gowns and *soirées* and oft dressed up pennywoodens in the costumes of fancy, playing at dolls with the children of the yard; though her teeth were already rotting,

she had been but fourteen when wed. She cherished as a gallant brother her stepson Pamphile and wept for joy when he returned from France. Alas, the more beguiled she was by the rake Pamphile, the more she must look with chagrin on whom she had wed.

Madame began to conjure an airy husband more to her liking. She charged the housemaids, gather her bouquets of orchids and announce them delivered at M'sieu's request. Ah well! Who would not be moved by the orchids, with their birdlike shape, "wings" spread to fly, & golden pollen? Alas! The bold appearance of passion was deceptive, for though orchids sprouted everywhere on that isle, they were constrained to cling to trees, to fallen logs, to fence posts and roofs and walls. True, their tangled roots sucked air, but no fluting ballad emerged from the twisted pipes. The blossoms but guzzled dust, bark bits, twiggy motes, seed husks, & insect shells, the nutrition of the slovenly flora.

Madame bade the wenches pull the orchids from their greedy roots, wrap their short stems in ribbon, and throw the bouquets in at the windows, whilst she tittered behind her hand at an airy gallant. Without their roots, the flowers drooped, then wilted fast, their faint sweet fragrance of ginger turned to a putrescent smell of long-standing water.

Pierre in his library passions had perused enough fancy-tales to fathom her tippety-toed tripping to greet her imagined lover with outstretched hand. In a braver moment, she stretched that hand to Pamphile, though she would not be indulgently used by a rogue accustomed to wenches he could roger with no elaborate cozen. Despite his hauteur, he brooked no ceremony in amours. He stared at Madame most coldly, then very slightly bowed.

"And be you so fond of my person, Madame, you would oblige me in furthering with your husband a certain project I have conceived for bettering my fortune, of tickling the fancy of Parisians with highly bred varieties of orchids, so as to create a feverish

market, as for tulips among the Dutch, and indeed all Europe, in my grandfather's day."

And he kissed the back of her hand then, and turned it over, and nuzzled the palm with his lips, and the wrist, and, indeed, the tender inner elbow.

"Dufay does not care for these gaudy blossoms," squealed Madame. "It is I who pin one in my bosom. Oh, my good dear friend, I will be your confidante and hear with joy of your unfolding schemes. Oh, I will take your ambition so to heart you will say you have found a veritable muse of orchids."

"Muse?" Pamphile dropped her arm. "What needs me a muse? Damn me, Woman, I look for allotments and letters of credit; you offer no word in his ear on my behalf but only your hand on mine. It will not do, Mistress Stepmother."

"Pray, find me not 'mother' in any degree, but 'sister,' nay, not sister, but friend of your heart, not friend but—"

"Good day, Good Lady. I am pleased to see you are well," said her gallant, and he bowed again, very slightly and stiffly, and turned on his high red heel.

Then her countenance crumbled, like the surface of water broken by the fall of a leaf. Tears fell and her hands shook and she dropped the pocket she had been working. And the dutiful servant Pierre picked it up. And bowing his head held it out to her. And she snatched it petulantly and retired, with no kind word for Pierre, nor any reward. And flouncing in her chair she stroked the long silken hairs of a small white dog brought with the China trade.

I had been young master's body servant. I was accustomed to order the chaos his carelessness spread in its wake. When he had neglected to latch the gate of the poultry yard, and the fowl trooped into the mansion begging for corn, it was I who had shoosed them and quieted the maids. So I bowed to the foolish,

miserable woman, and fell on one knee and intoned, "Most Reverend Mistress, your devoted servant attends your smallest wish." And in this as in most other servile remedies, ever I tried on the gullible whites, I was pleased to be effective.

She twirled her ringlets on her finger and left off wiping her eyes on her sleeves; seeing her so gladdened I persevered over time in the custom of kneeling & intoning—never, I hope, lapsing into familiarity, nay, I would never have woo'd a woman so lacking in wit.

Yet my appearance pleased. Reflected in the glasses, I cut a better figure than Pamphile, for mine was not the sag-eyed, red-nosed, tobacco-fogged countenance of a dissipated rummy. My manners were more courteous than the young master's, my temper tighter checked. I do not boast of my virtue in this regard. A slave needs a check on his temper, lest in anger he bite his tongue. This fey young Madame could snap her fingers at a house man as at her dog, and madden him with charges he hold his hands as a reel while she wound her silks on them. Oh, it were best not to frequent her paths, and mostly I did not.

Pierre had never looked to a day when Madame might sidle into his library, tucker spilling from her bodice as stuffing from a torn cushion, her hair wired with orchids, as a nymph's in a pageant. Casting glances over her shoulder, she withdrew from her pocket a folded piece of paper to press into my hand.

"You will know the name of my cavalier," she whispered.

And tittering behind her fan, she squeezed up her hoops to sidle through the door. Behind her the nails of her small white dog clicked and skittered across the polished floor.

Not to attend Madame were surely to offend her. Yet to submit to her wishes, encouraging her distraction, were to invite the wrath of M'sieu, for no man likes to be a CUCKOLD, and certainly not

to his BREEDING STOCK. What contempt might I invite from my wife if I submit, what anxiety provoke if I refuse? What divine wrath my wife's might echo I could not divine but feared. Many a time Père Gouy had looked out over his randy goats to warn us slaves, the wages of sin be death, we forget at our peril, the terrible Fathergod ruled in the Anduves.

Ah, what is sin?

The sins are gluttony, pride, avarice, sloth, vanity, envy, & LUST.

Could they all be forgiven for a hundred "mea culpas?"

Oh, and "Hail Marys." For the Mother of God is kinder than God, and God will do all for His Mother, yet She too has Her hand out, boys. Now see what pudding you can snatch for Her from your master's kitchen.

Père Gouy would marry us slaves for a fee, and marry again, even as he baptized. He would have closed the eyes of the dead with coins and married the corpse on the morrow had he been paid. He slept with three fat widows in a sagging bed of string and did not marry one. He prayed for his own soul, he said, and lit many candles.

*Hail Mary, full of grace.* Were the heat and stench of hell worse than those of a boiling house? The devil could be no crueller than an overseer forcing a boiler dip his thumb and forefinger into a bubbling gravy to test if the sugar that stuck 'tween his digits would spin to crystalline thread—thinner than a hair. And narrower than the finest sugar thread the bridge to paradise, said the priest. All those sinners who fall into the chasm it spans must burn forever. *Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail Mary.*

The boiler who suffered the bridge of sugar was a man much taken into confidence, a man with extra rations of bacon & rum & cloth for an extra suit of clothes. For these perquisites he toiled in sweat-stained shifts, ladling the scalding juice from copper to smaller, hotter copper, tempering with lime to make the crystals

come, yet not too fast. For bacon & rum & cloth, his eyes were fogged with steam and burned, his faculties stewed with heat. Did sugar splatter him, it stuck like birdlime. For bacon & rum & cotton cloth, he cried out in agony begging to be saved, yes, he begged to be taken across the bridge to paradise, to the table under the tree of life where all sit down to eat, without distinction, nor order of precedence. But he was not saved. He only writhed and begged where he was, and did the shimmy-shake, and his masters got a pound of muscovado, cured.

Never mind, said Squint. There would be Judgment, said Squint. Though he it may have been who forced the boiler dip his hand in the gravy, he claimed he but fulfilled the terms of his indenture, and profited not. So he looked up to night's starry vault whence he descried four horsemen bearing down on earth from the cardinal points. With confidence he descried the great glittering horn held up to the glittering lips of the Lord and heard the horn winding the call to Judgment. For what had a righteous man to fear who did his work with his hands but kept for his God his soul? So said Squint. Yet he slept on a strong-roped bed well off the ground where scorpions lurked and roamed. And he had whipped Jean-François for claiming a revelation of Apocalypse in which all who carried out the wishes of the whites were damned along with their masters. Nay, then, Squint would not be smeared with the amorous treason of his erstwhile client PIERRE, the same who had refused to beget children for whom Squint could extract a percentage at the block. Even my godmothers would look on me askance, for courting a demented twit and betraying my wife—indeed, I knew not where to turn for help. Flight was my safest and only course. Yet how was I to devise MY ESCAPE?

On the eve of the fateful tryst, while the moon climbed in the sky, I dallied. I had feigned sickness, and so had not gone to the

ledger desk, but lay in my hammock, tossing and turning, considering my prospects. When the moon sailed full overhead, I must repair to the little-used ballroom where Second Madame's missive had enjoined me await her, there to pace beneath sconces furred with mold until she sallied forth in her riding clothes, her face a well-powdered mask in the moonlight, her wig white snakes, stuck high on her cheekbone a patch like a spider.

I threw myself at her feet to entreat her mercy. Yet I could not refuse her favors, nor would it be meet to remind her, she did herself a great wrong, in pitching herself to one so beneath her in station.

"There has been perplexion, Mistress Madame; I have not been able to learn the name of your cavalier, so I have been unable to deliver your letter to the honored recipient for whom it was intended."

"Can you not read?"

"But poorly," I insisted. "And only the estate books. Nor did I wish to trespass by reading the correspondence of my betters."

"Why do you suppose the letter was unsealed?"

She snatched the missive from me and brought it close to her face in the luminous dimness and made as if to read aloud:

"My gallant prince, disguised as a beast, covered with a dusky pelt, who though his lips curl above long, sharp teeth and his eyes, the soul's windows, are glazed with an animal luster, yet does there shine from them, as a candle that lights up a vast, dark room, a soul as noble as the soul of the greatest lord that ever trod on earth. From his graceful, restrained deportment, the pretty speeches he bestows upon a lady, and his glances that mingle passion & modesty, a great cavalier goes under a spell disguised as a toad."

She would never let the adverse opinion of persons of merit stand in her way, but looked to make a noble & generous gift of herself to the worthiest suitor any lady had ever been privileged

to be courted by, & cetera, & cetera, & cetera, with many fine expressions of sentiment cribbed from various florid scribblers.

Now whatever responsibility I bore for glances mixt with passion, I accepted none for disguise as a toad, nor did I care for such locutions as "animal luster." Yet circumstances did not permit the bandying of points.

"Mistress Madame, I am unworthy of the privilege you bestow in reading this lyric aloud in my presence. I most humbly beg your indulgence. Not knowing the name of your cavalier, I have not been able to deliver your missive, for I could not inquire of the gentlemen around without compromising your honor, Mistress Madame. Oh, I entreat you—whip me or mete out any harsh punishment I have deserved, for I am a bumbler. I am a dolt."

"Oh, gentle, gentle woolly-head, My Goody," she crooned. "Great-hearted ebon soul! Oh, noble prince in the homely hide of an orangutan lout, oh, I shall kiss you and—"

"Is your cavalier then your stepson Pamphile? That winsome courtier—"

"Kiss you again so that—"

"Mayhap the captain, the eloquent Squint, whose prophecies and tales—"

"—and draw back a little, so you may doff the disfiguring disguise—"

"—Modeste Devere, oh truly a worthy and virtuous soul, or Père Gouy, whose power to absolve—"

"Oh, why are you so stubborn! You must step out of your pelt now and be revealed! There is no time for niceness, Goody. Do as I say!"

"Alas, Madame Mistress, I am incapable of obliging you. Even were my skin like week-old small clothes—"

"Do as I say, Beast. You are Cupid. You cannot fool me!"

"Madame, you mistake yourself. I am poor black Goody, bondsman and scrivener."

"You will not oblige?"

"Madame, I cannot."

"I will tell my husband you have forced yourself on me, and exhibited your member, and tried to club my modesty with it—"

"Oh, Madame, do indeed, apprise your husband of my most egregious derelictions. I deserve both opprobrium and punishment, but only for my loutish ignorance in the matter of your cavalier's identity. Yet say not so, lest you dishonor yourself. Say I disobey and willingly I shall be flogged."

"My husband will indeed have you flogged. The militia will tie your arms and legs to four posts, and winding ropes around the posts, drag them behind four great oxen—"

"Oh, it is only what I have deserved; I will own my stupidity before them all, Mistress Madame! I will mumble my penance from the stocks till I rot in the excrement heaped on me. I only regret that I cannot conjure the name of your cavalier."

"You have killed the god within, Beast. You have smothered him in your wool. You will regret your perfidy. The militiamen will pour red pepper on the instrument you persecute me—"

All this time I had not lifted myself from the ground where I prostrated myself before her, though I caught her booted foot in my hand when she aimed some blows at my head. "I will have you boiled in sugar," she shrieked. "I will have you dunked till you drown. I will have you flogged and flogged again. Oh, Stinger is too good for you! And Four-Post—too good! I will have your sweetmeats pincered from your loins! I will have powder burned in your arse! Boom & splot & splot & boom! Naught but splinter and ingrate shred!"

"All these trials I will gladly and with whole heart endure, for I am callow & stupid & ignorant, not worthy of the trust you have placed in me. There is no punishment too great for an unruly servant who has trespassed as I have. Oh, sell me to the worst master known in this world, to be flogged until my blood runs into my

ears and worked, without holiday or sabbath, till I drop with my bill, my worthless flesh nibbled to the bone by rats while I live. Yet I would ask your mercy in one small respect, oh beautiful, saintly princess of Saint-Michel—

“There is no mercy for a worthless devil who presumes by violence to conquer the modesty—”

“I do not care what you whites with your whips and your chains will do, for I know I deserve to suffer. Yet, before I die I ask that my wife be not made privy—”

“Your wife?”

“Oh, please, do not disclose my worthlessness to her. But if she must know, then do not leave me with her, for her tongue will drive a spear through my heart that is sharper than the heathen one that pierced the side of the Blessed Lord.”

“You speak of Him in the same breath as the twisted witch of the kitchen? You call that miserable relict your wife? That slatternly mutterer? Oh, you are a perversion, an abomination. There is no punishment too great for you, not even your wife’s tongue-lashing.”

And she pointed her bony finger toward the quarter where we slaves dwelt.

“Crawl, Beast!”

Forsooth I crawled through the night till I came to the threshold of the house I had painted for my wife, which gleamed in the moonlight like a marble slab in the graveyard of the masters.

“Here is your worthless dog,” cried Second Madame. “Here is the cowardly chameleon who lives in greater fear of your curses than of flogging. Let him soil his breeches till your potions end his worthless life in a wrenching and fluxy ague.”

And she kicked me in the reins and walked away, forbearing in her rage to collect from me her missive, which still I held in my hand. I now spelled out its elaborate periods of foofaral prose, for my wife could read but receipts. Yet do not suppose my Pélérine

discomfited by what she heard. Kind Reader, I had apprised Pélérine of the mistress's blandishments and the accusations I now anticipated. And Vérité recalled a CURIOUS SUBTLETY that Madame had ordered for a family dinner—a concoction far too elaborate for a private meal—a marzipan bear (though Vérité had never seen a bear) that opened to reveal a prince.

"Oh, let it be a very brown bear," Madame had implored, "and a very fair prince, a gold-haired god with roseate wings sprouting from shapely, creamy shoulders."

Even so! When her mistress kicked me over her threshold, Vérité were in no wise bamboozled. Indeed, she credited not a tittle Second Madame's prevarication, but wept for my peril. I clung to her weeping as my mother must have clung to me when she knew she would be sold, and Vérité stroked my cheeks with her fingers, muttering toward the house:

"Powder your face, you dressmaker's doll, and wait for him plucking your tucker. Will you ply Baron Skull with rum? A dried fish? Will you grant him his papers? Now honey your tongue, Lady Coney. Ask your master to free this slave who has done him devoted service. Give him a brocade waistcoat, a sleek wig. A gun or a dog? Ah, rum! You have the keys, Doll. If the rum should loose your sweetheart's tongue? Skewer it with a needle. Bustle in his face the frame of your hoops. There is the stuff! Ask him to hold your bodkin. Skewer! Skewer! Now you are stitched. 'Husband, he casts his eye on me!' And suspicion hotter than fire burns. The slaveman flees his own roasting. Where can he go? Dog is the world on his track. See, he pants and hides. What is this cooking, cooking smell? Molten sugar, molten money sweats the palms of his hands. Thief! they cry. Then go by the sea where no dog smells the treason of your body. *Irosen*. Go!"

But as she urged on me my flight, I wept the harder, to see in her customarily stoical eyes, both the full and the squint, so many tears. She mopped at the flow with her apron. Then she tied into

her neckerchief my few necessities, a carved wood comb & a purloined kitchen knife, provisions of biscuit, manioc wrapped in palm leaf, a shoat's bladder of sweet spring water, & a calabash. She carefully folded the quilt from our bed, that she had sewed of slyly pocketed scraps. Most precious of all she gave me, wrapped in the head cloth she had worn when we married, her divination shells.

The missive which named an "orchidée brune" Madame's cavalier, Pélérine snatched from my fingers and threw on the coals. As it caught, the flames were reflected in her good eye, which shone now with a righteous gaiety. From her pocket she pulled her sugar-baked poppet dressed in palm frond and cane stalk, feathers pulled through a hole in its chest where its heart would have been. I knew at once what I had never seen before: it was the image of M'sieu. Then scraping from the embers the ash of his wife's letter, she rubbed the face of the doll in them. "Now go!" she breathed, sprinkling ash into the mouth of my talisman pouch, ash on the beetle's case, ash on the white feather, ash on the pumpkin seed, the five maize kernels. Ash on the fish hook, the garlic skins, the sayings of godmothers and savants. "Go whilst he cannot see."

With speedy stealth, we repaired to the river's-mouth warehouse from which hogsheads of 'lasses, rum, and sugar were shipped. With newfound strength in my clerk's hands, I forced the lock of the cooper's shop. From there we rolled out a tight-caulked BARREL, not as large as a hogshead, which I painted with de Buffon's name, having taken for my use in exile, as for ballast, several sturdy iron tools, viz., a hammer, a chisel, a saw and an ax. The barrel we upended in a boat, which I rowed out to sea.

When I had lost sight of land, I clambered into the barrel, perilously swaying in the wave-tossed boat, and, leaning gingerly over the sea with calabash shell in hand, I bailed the seawater

backward into the boat until I floated free in the bobbling barrel and the boat had sunk beneath me, a laborious & tedious business made the more difficult by the gyring barrel, though fortunately the sea was calm. With the oars he had taken into the barrel, Pierre did his wobbly best to pull away from the trail of bubbles rising from the boat as it sank, as if some creature breathed its last there. And when he had gone quite a way and thought himself quit of the sinking boat, he hacked through his oar handles one by one, with his ax, so he might keep them with him in the barrel when the lid was down. He longed to sleep, yet he feared he would be caught, so he rowed with his stubs of oars all night, only pulling them into his barrel, and his lid down over his head, when the sun poked up from the sea where he had been sleeping in a far better bed than Pierre.

Only one person would fit in a barrel that would rest level in a rowboat; two barrels in two boats might drift apart; and so I left my wife on shore, for I did not wish to risk her life with my own. We believed we would meet soon enough, perhaps at the Jardin du Roi, where I had addressed the barrel and where I trusted—didn't I? Oh, surely I would send for her! Pierre were a man of his word and of words. He would persuade Buffon to hire on the strength of succulent and enticing descriptions, not only of various dishes—her peppercorn paté—oh la!—but of certain mythological SUBTLETIES Pierre had devised, of which Vérité would master the execution. These would scratch the great one's itch for stripling placket. Now in these conceptions, a great God of old, viz., Jupiter or Apollo, has chased with the intent to violate a maiden not above twelve years. The latter has been mercifully transformed to a cow or a tree, and so the God embraces bark or hide to no avail. The fingers of the company at table would accomplish what the God's could not, revealing in laureal or bovine sanctuary the marzipan girl, helpless in the ravagers' hands. And these pandering subtleties we believed to be entirely novel, of an

art that none but Vérité possessed. And we prayed that Buffon would covet them—wouldn't he? Covet them for the exclusive prestige of his table, or better yet, keep them on a sideboard, covered with a clean white cloth, until the guests had taken their leave.

Kind Reader, you may wonder, a man of honor, ambitious to make his way, would pander so basely to a base craving. Yet Pierre stood outside the great, bright room where the philosophers remade the world. If the tall doors were latched against the entry of his full-fleshed honor, he would starve it small enough to slide beneath the door, like a hungry mouse, the flexible bones of which give way. The mouse will retake its roundness inside, where it will feast on cake! And beneath the locked doors of the festive chamber, Buffon's salon, two fugitives who were more than hungry, who were terrified of predators, predators even then gaining ground, two fugitives with their stomachs in their mouths wished to slide, and be regaled with cake!

No doubt we were mad with the grief of our parting, and thus we hatched these lunatic SCHEMES that skittered about in our innards, chittering and squeaking. We were desperate to throw ourselves at the feet of a faraway stranger, whom our own M'sieu so revered. Oh, such was our frenzy! Though we knew we must part, our hands did not want to separate. Yet part we must! And so, having professed our mutual devotion to each other, and to our scheme, my wife and I parted, with enough sighs and embraces, despite our haste, to satisfy the reader of any fancy tale, and many satisfying professions of mutual devotion. And these promissory notes alone might have convinced M'sieu, had he been present, my troth be plighted to Vérité, and for my marriage I had deserved a garden, like any other bridegroom in the yard I must vacate for FREEDOM.

PART THE SIXTH

*Voyage of an Apprentice Savant*



While the philandering Fire God Whom ancients called Apollo did glisten in His knife-wheeled chariot, blood on teeth & cock, I, Pierre, settled into my barrel and pulled the cap down tight above my head, so tight I could lift it but with difficulty from within, where I sat packed in darkness as a magnum in sawdust, praying to be taken for CARGO. I hoped for a tide that would sweep me into the lanes that bore shipping to France, from whence a passing packet's captain, supposing my barrel had rolled off a deck, might salvage me for reward. And if the captain bid his men prize out the cap? I would not dwell on the perils should I be returned; even if caught, I hoped to be sold in a British port to spite the French.

Woe to me if my barrel wash up in the Canaries, I be taken for the sugar plantings there. Better to be pressed for the gang of a ship—no slaver, I prayed. Better, did I touch some populous region of Hispania, work for bread an indentured laborer, nearly free. I did not suppose I might drift to Guinée, for I had examined the maps, finger-hopping estimate. With luck I might float to some stronghold of maroons, thence swoop down to steal Pélérine,

both of us live free. Ah, but maroons were ragged scroungers, fleeing musket balls, I, estate-bred, with a free man's learning and habits. Although I stood charged as a reprobate, I vaunted myself on authorial prospects, so I had staked my hopes on TRANSPORT TO FRANCE AND BUFFON. So great was that worthy's renown, privateers oft honored the labels of crates addressed to him, so I had been told. But set foot on French soil, I should by law be free, if free, make my fortune, and, if fortunate, offer for my wife a price improvident M'sieu could not refuse, most particularly if the offer were conjoined to threats of disclosure.

Upon my arrival in France, then, I proposed to commence my rise forthwith, demonstrating my usefulness as an AMANUENSIS. I looked to be articulated an apprentice savant, yet though I had arrived in a barrel like a shipment of molasses. Granted, a savant must present a dignified appearance; after a long, crampity sea voyage, my linen would be soiled. Directly upon disembarkation, therefore, I must set up as a scrivener quayside. I did purpose a business on my barrel's very head, where I might scribble bills of lading or copy deeds or wills, bartering for clothes less used than those in which I had arrived. A point in my favor: I wore breeches, however soiled by the master's dribbled snuff, and not merely drawers. If I hid my brand and affected a haughty, cavalier manner, I might pass as a very dark creole, a soldier, mayhap, who had preserved the King's claims across the water. Yet my lineaments were the soft ones of a clerk. Moreover I could be undone by an honest response to inquiries after my name, for no free man has but one name; the single appellation is meet for cow or dog. 'Tis true a king is known by his Christian name, but a disheveled voyager stepping out of a barrel will not be confused with the King of France. I must get me a SECOND NAME, that followed the first, and not "Dufay's Pierre," if I would rise in the world of savants.

Now some slaves of my acquaintance had taken second names from nostalgia for Guinée. Alas, to contemplate Guinée were to

contemplate the past and loss; I looked to future and to gain. Though he had sold my mother, had not Dufay been kind? *Pierre Dufay*. Yes, to compensate his investment in my education, with which I had absconded, I owed him the honor of taking his name. Yet might a zealous bounty hunter kidnap me, taking that name as an address, return me to him from whom I had stolen my person and could now look for punishment. Moreover, the name *Dufay* had been soiled by Master's peculations! Though I had not revealed them, indeed, had concealed them, the blot on his escutcheon had spoiled his coinage to my tooth. Besides, the man had sold my mother! Yet he had saved my wife. Then again: Dufay were revered—by none other than Monsieur de Buffon—for reliably painting avia, flora, & fauna. This glory might reflect on mine. I did not wish to be taken for a quashee pet, but for a worthy man, a man of weight, deserving patronage, promotion, and, indeed, esteem. Holloa! I would proclaim a new allegiance! I would take for my own the name of the sage of Montbard: *BUFFON. PIERRE BAPTISTE DE BUFFON*. The name had a fine, lofty ring that gave the lie to the cognomen *Goody*. *Bon-Bon is dead, vive Buffon, Pierre Baptiste de Buffon*.

Would I thrive with the nomen of the grand savant? Or drown in the white man's shadow? I unwrapped my wife's headcloth, which I carried in my bosom. I spilled her shells onto the tiny patches of quilt that covered what there was of barrel bottom between my tools and my feet. I felt with my fingers to see which shells had landed mouth-up: O mouth of mouths, speak! Yet how could they? I had never known the names of the patterns, nor their several services; now they lay silent amongst the tools. I did despair of successful DIVINATION, quite, quite despair.

Then a noisome tickle-foot strolled through the forest of hairs on my face. A louse? A fly? A scorpion? By diameter and circumference of the moving ring of feet, I knew the creature for a spider, familiar of Scratch Cat, familiar of my wife. Oh Spider,

I did importune her silk-speck touchiness, my hands caressing the shells at my feet, I pray you be no poisonous foe in the guise of friend. I pray you disclose my fate as the bearer of my new name.

And there whispered in my ear a hissing sound, like the voice of the sea from a cownie's mouth. *Iroson*, said the voice. It was Pélérine! Speaking from whence I knew not. *Mark you! No one knows*, she murmured, *what lies at the bottom. Your name*, she murmured, *your name you have never known and do not know now*, she murmured. *Your name*, she murmured, *has not yet chosen you*.

"What shall I call myself?"

*What you will*, she hissed in the voice of the sea that caresses a shore.

"Bon-Bon is dead," I cried. "Here is Pierre Baptiste de Buffon."

*No one knows*, she hissed. *Iroson: No one knows what lies at the bottom of the sea. Lost at the bottom. No one*.

I saw before me as if present in my keg my Pélérine, embracing the rain barrel in the yard, her cheek laid on the surface of the water, where floated an ashy cork. She sang to the cork, "Ba-wal-loo-mah." She blew on the cork, softly, patiently, entreating it to the harbor of her hand.

Ah Pélérine! Though her speech was broken, yet her spirit was whole. Having once been twisted to the murder of her child, she had learnt how a soul must be true to the good or die more times than lash or fire can impose. How I rued the distinction 'twixt her deep and hard-won knowledge and the frivolous, untried ignorance of Second Madame. How blithely Madame had betrayed the servant who had pitied her, with one careless stroke negating my prospects, destroying my reputation, robbing me of my hearth, my wife, & my friends, exposing me to the direst hazards, mayhap depriving me of life itself. Yet how could I blame her? (I wrapped my cownies in the cloth again.)

I had been betrayed, less by Madame's folly than by my own simplicity. Yes! Attention might have warned me, the simplest acts of kindness, intended but to save the scatterbrained Second Madame from scandal & degradation, were rampant, arrogant presumption in a slave, who must never, never act at his own volition. Now it were fitting for me to be thrown on the mercy of the sea with its capricious tides, hoping to gain some charity through luck. I beat my breast with the palm of my hand, bewailing my foolishness.

In the rumpus of lamentation, the spider jumped off my face. I did not know if she lurked in a cranny or crouched on a stave, yet her presence was everywhere in the stifling barrel, like the hot breath of a deity tickling my neck and knees. I begged her tell me how I might survive, for surely my luck depended on her blessing. "Speak to me," I cried.

There was silence, but the spider walked down my neck and rested in the bosom of my shirt where I kept my cowries.

And then I saw I must throw them again, for the mouths of the shells were the spider's mouth. So again I spilled the cowries onto the quilt beneath my feet, and with my fingers felt to hear the pattern I had cast.

Again I heard the hiss and rush of Vérité's whisper. *From the lie the truth is born. What is known should not be asked. Look forward and backward. Extend your hand as far as it reaches. What is known should not be asked. What you dropped, do not again retrieve.*

"What else?" I cried.

A sloshing spoke, for the caulking had not yet swollen up in the barrel's joints; water was leaking in. Soon the spirits that spoke through the mouths of the shells would drown in sump. So I retrieved them, one by one, till I balanced them all on my thigh. Having dried them on my breeches, I wrapped them once again in the head-cloth and stowed them in my bosom. I must needs

take up my calabash, and raise my lid, and bail, now, in the proper direction, viz., from the vessel into the sea.

As I bailed in a rhythm, dip and splash, dip and splash, as regular as a heart-beat, I listened for my name, choosing me, chanting me, yet I heard between the dip and the splash but the expostulations of the finger-wagging butler, Jean-François, hinting about the peril of ogling above his station, thus:

“Did you hear of Guy Montal, the captain at Boucicault’s place, who for peeping at his mistress’s paps, as she pushed them up in her bodice, was hung by his wrists with tinder lit between his fingers? Guy Montal could have passed for white. And you, fool Goody, you be no captain who manages the labor of an estate, but a tinkering master’s experiment, an indulgence who is suffered the appearance of perquisites.”

“Pierre looked only at the ground!” I cried. “Oh, speak in my wife’s voice, Spider, not in the reproachful tones of a sententious house-man.”

But the spider had retreated and nothing replied. The shells were silent in my bosom. Naught did I hear but the dip and splash of bailing. Back and forth went my arm, dip and splash, dip and splash; cutting the time the slap! slap! of waters against my barrel. Back and forth, slap and slap, dip and splash and slap and slap. Still the spider and the cowries were silent. What could I do? I gave myself to bailing with my whole heart and left off seeking to converse with the silence beneath the noise of water and work.

By the time I had dumped the best part of the bilge, I had become dizzy in the glare of Apollo, the glint of Whose golden hair did burn my eyes and stew my wits. I nestled down into my barrel under my soothing lid, and, clutching my dear truncated oars, I closed my eyes, hoping to sleep, yet the waters continued to slap against the sides of my barrel. My mind knew no rest; the engine of ratiocination continued to churn as an infernal mill, run by a

wheel, that grinds without cease. And it milled a stream of bitter, bitter retrospections of a highly conditional nature, viz., I wished Second Madame had clamped the jaws of her attention on the horny Squint, so much closer to her station! Alas! He had learnt his lesson in Virginia; he were caution itself with Madame Dufay. Though he might revolve his eyes in his head, to stare at her bosoms, he spoke to her more laconic than her husband. And randy Pamphile? Did not wish to be bothered courting his father's wife. And the hands? Knew enough to keep their eyes on the ground, their mouths shut. Only Goody—alack!—made free, though Pierre will ever swear, 'twere with pity, to assuage Madame's pouts with complaisances. *Talk, talk, talk!*

Was I to be granted no rest, but bludgeoned with blame and reproach when most I needed merciful forgiveness? Now I began to suppose the REMONSTRANCES that tortured me a more terrible visitation. Mayhap the tickle-touch spider were no emissary of my wife nor yet of Jean-François, nor even of Squint, but prowled with malice in every hair of its feet from the realm of GORMILAH, the greedy-guts god-lady commanding the allegiance of the Obangadwon people, like the boiler Beloo, who had taught us to honor Her Fearsomeness & Powerful Strength.

Now Gormilah lives in a very round body, with sixty-four navels and one hundred and eight hands that She walks on as feet when the fancy takes Her, though Her greatest fancy is to sit very still, waiting for the white Gods to doze. If you had met Her, you would not soon forget Her twenty-four tongues in Her twenty-four mouths in Her twenty-four heads, which tongues She rolls out to full length, lures for flies or dogs or men—white men, yes, for She protects the black, but black men too, if they hurt women. Do you know Her? With hands of hair She beckons her prey. *Attention!*

Yet then I heard a more comforting voice, perhaps a ruse to tempt me, yet reassuring all the same, though, as ever, she did scold. 'Twas the old nurse, ROSE, who spoke, saying, "You torment yourself with palaver, heart's son. Alack! Your head is a dry empty gourd with your tongue rattling round as a pebble. Prattle, prattle! You have yourself to blame, for muttering under your breath when you could occupy your days with useful work. Like that poor fellow Granny Nancy conjured, Granny Nancy, worn out from work, who sat before her house, a spindle in one hand, the other out for food, retailing husks of stories for keep—now Granny Nancy knew whereof she spoke."

A long time ago, Nancy told Rose, who told Pierre, who spun the tale in his barrel as now he spins it for you, Kind Reader, a long time ago, then, there lived a HUNTER-MAN named KWAFESI, an ordinary man with but one wife, a man who sat on the ground far from the King when the men met in council. Now one day Kwafesi was walking along a very narrow track through the forest, not far from his garden where he had been digging yams. He was in good spirits; he had a little sling fashioned from some twisted vines, and with his sling he had already shot two finches, killed them with one dart apiece. He was carrying home the birds for stew. He was preening himself as he strutted along his path, which no-one knew about but he, and vaunting himself on the good hunting he always had along it, and singing an expectful stew-song, chuckling and chuckling, his mouth already watering. Oh, he could smell that stew! He could see his wife, SiKwasi, stirring ue-ue berries into it. He could see her slicing in nalima root. He closed his eyes and he breathed in the smell of the stew and FWANG! He stumbled.

"Treacherous, lazy tree root," he grumbled. "Lying across the path." He was all set to kick it. Yet in truth it was no tree root that

had tripped him; it was a skull, right in the middle of a bend in the path, with no other bones around it. A human skull!

"Pray, good sir, what business brings you to this bend on my proprietary path?" inquired Kwafesi.

"Good sir, I wish I knew," nattered the skull, clacking its meatless jaws. "La-la-la! One moment, dear sir, I was talking, the next, dear sir, I am here."

Oh, la-la-la indeed! What a tale to preoccupy PIERRE IN HIS BARREL. There he floats, homunculus cogiteur, Seigneur Cogito-Sum, a talking skull! He prattles as one whose wits have lost him, therefore he his wits; so by definition he is witless, and must be acknowledged, by corollary, worthless. Yet all the same, a talking skull is a curiosity, and therefore, a find! There is hope for Pierre. And KWAFESI?

Kwafesi tried to lift the skull from the path, that he might carry it back to its village, but the skull was aghast.

"Please, kind sir! This is my true and right abode. Now would you care to be snatched from your dwelling place, without so much as a by-your-leave? Would you care to be transported as an unwilling object for who knows what purpose? Leave me, sir, I pray! I say leave me! Pray! Put me down at once, sir! At once!"

Kwafesi backed away from the skull, murmuring apologies. It would not do to have the skull cry through the village, like a war-trophy bride, how cruel Kwafesi had abducted the sulky, wretched thing against its will. There was no point taking into his household a talking skull if the skull would not tell entertaining stories and improving proverbs. Besides, Kwafesi did not want to incur the wrath of the undead dead. Who knew how many of those lost souls were skulking roundabout, ready to avenge the honor of this carping skull? Best to humor it, leave it where it was. Yet all the same, it be a find, and he, Kwafesi, be the finder.

Kwafesi mulled and fretted as he walked with his neatly gutted spice finches back to his village; he had lost all interest in stew. A talking skull! Everyone would want to see it. And Kwafesi would not deny them their wish, though he would swear each one to secrecy. From each one he brought to his find, he could ask some favor in return. Oh, he was going to lead one comfortable life from now on!

Yalangawi—now that one had shot a very handsome sipuwaleri bird and was hoarding its long orange tail feathers for a hat. “Like the rays of the sun, my hat will fulgurate, fulgurate,” boasted Yalangawi, preening a feather between his thumb and his forefinger. Well now! If Yalangawi wanted to be taken along the secret path to the talking skull, he would have to pay a few orange feathers in toll. His sun would “fulgurate, fulgurate” with skimpier rays.

And Filurawari—her! No more flirting, edging toward the ue-ue bush, then dragging her feet. If she wanted to go along the secret path to the talking skull, she would have to go with Kwafesi under the ue-ue bush. And weren’t there ue-ue all along the path to the skull? She would bear his child, he would take her into his household, she would pound yams and help SiKwasi with the roof. He had dreamed of being one of those powerful men who kept two wives—perhaps three, four, ten, twenty, four times twenty. And all of their children. A man with a talking skull could feed a lot of mouths!

A talking skull! Kwafesi told everyone he met! Over and over he told the story. As he told it, the size of the skull grew larger, and its voice louder, until the ordinary prattling skull he had tripped on was as big as his house, its voice as loud as his own when he reproved his wife. Then, as the people Kwafesi told about the skull told their friends, the skull grew larger, still, its voice even louder. First the skull was as big as the olaka-doctor’s house, then as big as the King’s. Oh it was big! With a voice as loud as a volcano’s!

When the King had heard about the skull larger than his house, with a voice as loud as five volcanoes, he was impressed. 'As big as my kingdom!' he said. 'And you say it roars!' he said. 'Oh, most entertaining prospect!'

Now a man was fortunate who could entertain the King. That man would be allowed to sit on a stool when the men gathered in council. He could look down at all those who still sat on the ground. Kwafesi smiled and touched his fingers to his chest.

The King gave the nod to the stool-bearers, and some of them clustered around Kwafesi. And they gently lowered him onto a stool, then picked up the stool and carried Kwafesi, nicely shaded with palm fronds, footing it for him, first along the broad path that everyone took to the gardens, later along the narrow path that only Kwafesi had known. Men with blades went ahead of the King's viewing party, widening the path at Kwafesi's direction. Now everyone would know his path. The hunting would not be as good, to be sure. Yet from now on Kwafesi would be an important man, a finder, a man who directed other men. How sweet his elevation!

As the party proceeded along the path to the bend of the trail where the skull did its talking, the path-clearers and stool-lifters and frond-shaders and professional flatterers were chatting and laughing, boasting and telling stories. And so the time passed quickly; the journey was short. Quite soon they saw the skull, right in the middle of the bend in the path, not quite as large as anyone had hoped, but gleaming and smooth, as if ants had worked all night to clean it for a special occasion. And the stool-men set Kwafesi and the King down with barely a bump apiece, and the King rose from his stool and walked the three steps to the skull with his arm across the shoulder of his fresh-discovered favorite, Kwafesi, so as to hear for himself the torrentially loud and copious clack-talk of the bony jaws.

"I ask you now," said Kwafesi to the skull, "on behalf of this truly great king, tell me, my good, good sir, what are you doing at the bend in my path?"

Several skitter-tits flew chittering up from their branches and settled down again. The flies buzzed and circled and dove. The skull said nothing.

"I most earnestly beg your pardon," said Kwafesi, standing on one foot then the other. "I have failed to make matters clear. As you must needs see, good skull-sir, our King has honored you with a visit. And he would like to hear from your very own mouth exactly and precisely how you came to be talking in the middle of the bend in my proprietary path not far from where this morning I dropped two finches with darts from my sling."

A skink lizard scurried over the skull's face. A glimmeranda butterfly lit on its nose-holes. One of the King's frond-shaders coughed. And the skull?

Silence.

Already Kwafesi suspected betrayal, but he knew not what had occasioned the silence of the skull.

Pierre in his barrel knew, or did he? Homunculus had seen the world contradict itself, turning of a sudden on its axis, invisible but to Cogito-Sum, who apprehended that he had ceased to be at the center, though his apprehension would do him no good. Seigneur Cogito-Sum wished no ill befall Seigneur Kwafesi. He could not and cannot separate the strand of Kwafesi's tale from the strand of his own in the unraveling yarn. Pierre at sea was a man who watched himself in a mirror and found all reversed. He was floating in a sea of reflections that mirrored one another in an endless glimmer of PARADOX, yet, what hurt his heart was not this relentless glimmer; it was the betrayal at the center, where the Gods live, beyond or beneath or inside the play of

light. And of this betrayal, Seigneur Cogito-Sum was too choked to speak.

Alas! Poor Kwafesi! They were already murmuring, the path-clearers and stool-bearers and frond-shaders and professional flatterers.

The King was frowning. The butterfly on the nose holes fluttered its wings.

"Please," said Kwafesi, wringing his hands. "I entreat you, good Sir Skull. Let us not shilly-shally, no, nor dilly-dally." He stamped his foot. "Answer at once, as you did before: how came you here to my path."

But the skull remained silent.

With his hand above his heart, fingers fluttering rapidly, Kwafesi bowed his head to the King. "This is how it is with skulls. What can one do? Their eyes have been pecked out, and their wits have rotted away. Your Highness, you are right to glare and stamp your foot. I hold with you: most irritating—Now see here, Skull! Being dead is no excuse for sloth. . . . Great King, wise King, you see what I must endure with Sir Skull—sly—disobedient—deceitful—lazy—cannot be relied upon—"

The frowning King had raised his hand very high, and he brought it down very fast. Two of the strong-armed stool-bearers grabbed Kwafesi's shoulders and pulled him down to the ground, a third one stretched out Kwafesi's neck, and a path-clearer chopped off Kwafesi's head. Then the King was lowered onto his stool. His stool-boys lifted. His frond-men made once again a canopy above the King's most esteemed and, indeed, venerated person. And the King and his follow-boys departed, bobbing and crunching as they walked with Kwafesi's empty stool down the path toward the village where the blood congealed in the fly-blown eyes of Kwafesi's finches, their gutted bellies digesting air. Soon his wife would paint her face with mud and wail.

In the silence at the bend in the path, sun shone on stone and soil. The skull opened its mouth and yawned, then at last in the lazy fullness of warm silence, addressed itself to Kwafesi, asking, "Pray, what business brings you here, good sir?"

And the head of Kwafesi replied, "Oh, la-la-la! I wish I knew. One moment talking, the next, dear sir, dear sir, the next I was here."

And this on his own proprietary path! The people called it Kwafesi's Trail, and the hunting was not too bad there, though it was not at all good near the blathering skulls, which everyone walked well around. So it was told, even far across the sea and many years away.

Pierre in his barrel clutched his oars. He leaned his head on them, his eyes closed, his mouth watering. He saw Kwafesi's finches, hanging uneaten. Pierre's stomach cramped and his gorge heaved. How he would have liked to be hiding in the underbrush near Kwafesi's village! He would have waited till night-fall, then he would have sneaked into Kwafesi's house; he would have cut down those finches, grateful that others feared to enter the abode of a man so recently dead, and dead in so unlucky a manner. But Pierre would not have escaped Kwafesi's hungry ghost, hanging around there. It would have entered his body with the flesh of the bird he was roasting over a little fire as far away as he could run. Oh, Pierre might have thought he could escape Kwafesi's fate, but it would have followed him, as men follow their noses to the smell of cooking meat. Oh, indeed, his fate had followed him.

Yes, for talk, mere talk, Pierre floated in the barrel, Cogito-Sum in the wooden head of a dunce who had lost his body, HOMUNCULUS MAROONED on the murderous sea. Yet it might have been worse. He might have had his nose slit, his ears cut off. He might have been flogged to stripes then slipped into an iron

yoke fitted with hooks to discourage the rash, swift move; frog-marched and thrown on the ground, his hands and feet cleaved with stakes, his torso impaled on them, a torch held to his feet to burn him up by degrees, with only his head saved to be hoist on a pike through the charred bloody neck lest his fellows think his soul had 'scaped back to Africa, and kill themselves to gain like passage. And what did Cogito-Sum say of that? He says: the pain of cunning appliances can never be the worst; the worst will always be betrayal. For the pike through the neck the driver Squint, who called himself friend, would have rammed himself.

"Oh Goody," Squint whispered in my embarreled ear, "Like a quashee from the tanks you are one great dunce, and greater a dunce than any quashee for they have no privileges, whilst you—fool Goody!—have squandered your perks!"

"Will you lift no finger to save me?"

"What? And ruin myself?"

"Jolicoeur gone, I have no father but you, no protector."

"You betrayed a generous protector," hissed the voice of the master.

"M'sieu! Have you followed? With a patrol?"

"Unto Caesar," Père Gouy sighed, put upon, put upon. "Your body unto Caesar, your soul unto God. Obey and be saved. That is all the religion a slave need know. You, Master Fool's Cap, you ignored the precepts I laid before you, simple as a dish of peas. And nourishing. Yet you waited for pork!" He sighed again.

"Hush now!" scolded old Rose. "You are going to freedom, Goody! Never mind those bright malicious men. You listen to your old Nurse Rose."

*Anchor up, mark the bells and say farewell to harbor lights. The circling wings, scavenger beaks. Same water running beneath the slave boat, the free boat. Coils of the sugar still. Rum drips, rain drips, blood drips. The baby is dead.*

"No!" cried Pierre, though he saw his wife blowing the cork to the harbor of her hand, and, oh, he would survive and live free.

On the lonely wave Pierre rode with a populous company, talking in the barrel of his skull. Finger-wagging chiders abounded; soothing comforters, one or two. And how was Pierre to still the babble and hear his own name speak itself, as his cowry spider urged? And where was his spider? Pierre lifted his barrel-head, and admitted light to his cell, and examined every inch of it. No spider. Perhaps there was none. If no spider, then he had to guide him but his own dead reckoning, though his mute cowries might yet speak through their own mouths—he patted the bundle that lay in his shirt—moreover he had his talisman pouch, though it had never had a voice. He fingered the bag most fondly. Then, alas, to his consternation and distress, he felt on his fingers the tickle-foot, and looked down to see her poking from his very pouch her hairy head, then two hairy legs, though she popped back into the pouch upon hearing the intake of Pierre's breath.

And now Pierre in his great discomfiture dropped his barrel-head overboard and must needs fish it back, with perilous leanings and bendings in his wobbly rudderless craft, an undertaking that so occupied him, he did not look up till he heard a voice cry loud and near, "Aloft lad! Salvage alee!"

And in terror yet in longing, Pierre with trembling hands snapped down above him the soggy barrel-head retrieved in the nick of time. From the bunghole he spied the STURDY BARK that bore down. He heard the luffing of the sails, the snap of the sheets. He heard the muffled chant and curse of the men who hauled up the mainsail, men pressed from gutters and jails, but freer than Pierre. He saw the barefoot ragamuffin swaying in the rigging. And he heard him cry, "'Tis yawing, sir. 'Tis very light, belike. 'Tis very near empty, sir. Belike 'twas tossed when the beef was eat, to clear the deck."

And did Pierre weigh so little, compared to a side of salted beef, a boy whose voice has not yet changed might judge his keg unworthy of salvage? Oh, see the name of the sage writ on the side of the keg, Pierre cried, but he gave no voice to his words, for he dared not court his own discovery. Already the ship were coming about, creaking and flapping and rushing away. And Pierre at the bunghole read her name carved into her taffrail amidst winged women blowing on horns—was it the Resurrection then, the Judgment of Quick and Dead? Would I see my mother and mother's mother?—oh, did these winged seraphs blow for me, these sisters of the angels on the marble houses of the white dead? *Santa Clara*, a Spanee or Portogee ship, her bright sails shining. And behind her, gulls circling and circling, further and further from Pierre. Yet his barrel was not as light as the boy said, for the hammer & the ax & the chisel rested under his feet, and Pierre carried man-weight, so the boy had lied to save him.

“Oh dear spider,” cried Pierre. “It is the wrong salvation!” Spider said nothing from within the charmy legacy bag. “Oh messenger of whomever!” pleaded Pierre. “Speak to me! Tell me what I am to make of this dreadful fate, to have been ignored for the kindest of motives.”

She would not tell him. Though she spoke from a hundred mouths, she would not or could not advance his knowledge of the fate that had passed him by. Any more than she could or would discover to him the history & customs of his Fombé people. She could or would tell him no more than scores of new hands had, whom he had asked when they came from the tanks to Dufay's. Each one he had asked about the people who had woven the bag, pointing to the bands of darker weaving that were its principle decoration. Yet none among the bondsmen had seen its like. Was Pierre destined to live in ignorance of his lineage?

Yet, when his barrel had been taken to France, and Pierre dwelt among enlightened savants, in the reflected glory of the Sun at

the center, what need would he have of the name his mother had been saving for him? What need for tidings of his homeland? What for a stubborn spider who might well be poisonous? Mayhap he had been well advised by Père Gouy, who implored him, wear a cross round his neck, with which, if he were good, and obedient to his master, he would be saved. Overboard with spider and bag!

Nay, Pierre would not jettison spider or bag. His spider could rest as long as she liked among the relicts of Mandilé-Ba's sad journey through unsympathetic hands. It augured well to keep the tickle-foot in the bag! Turn again: if the spider would not tell him of his lineage, then how could she be speaking through the mouths of godmothers, or in the sterner voices of godfathers? Turn yet again: was the spider the emissary of Gormilah, dread companion & intimate of Baron Skull? Why was the spider silent when she was silent, why did she speak when she spake?

UNCERTAINTY chafed at Pierre as he floated upon the brine in his keg, miserably folded in a stifling drift of days, a dank shiver of oceanic nights, yearning to be saved yet leery of discovery. He dare not crack the barrel's top, while the sun shone, to refresh the air, but must close himself in, opening but to bail, or piss or shit, or catch the raindrops in his calabash. Sometimes he feared he would be swamped in the stale wash of RECRIMINATION AND REGRET. Yet each time he slept and woke in the barrel, he pinched his arm and winced with joy that yet he lived. No patrol had come in a boat with nets & clubs & bills. Still he was afloat 'twixt old fate and new.

By night he stood and shook out his legs. He took heart. He had his calabash, his spoon, & his oars; his cowries, his talisman, his tools, his spider. Surely he was a fortunate man! Who might yet breathe deep of land, cheerfully swinging his arms, striding to a desk in a library that stretched from horizon to horizon. He might yet fix eyes on the myriad wonders & terrors abiding in the regions & domains of the world, and hearken to the myriad

sounds that give bubble and squeak to the squashed skins of continents floating on puddles in maps.

Yet what was WORLD to Pierre but that bobble-slosh barrel in which he curled? How monotonous the slop beneath and around him! How short his rations, how indeterminate his float! How sodden the quilt beneath his feet! Slosh and more slosh! Sorrowful the lapping sound of the waves, like an infant who sucks from the breast of a mother who has no milk. And Pierre had been brought to this pass by the crackbrained indulgence of a lunatic maggot-mouth whom he had looked to soothe—ah me!

In the despairing and solitary state I was in, I considered, as a man aggrieved by a woman will, the NATURE OF WOMEN. I balanced in one pan the breast-milk tales my godmothers had given me to suck, the meemie-worm cure of the wife whose gift of cowry shells I coddled in my hands; in the other pan I balanced my same dear Vérité's murder of her child; the first Madame's rat-trapping guiles; but heaviest and most baneful, the heartless, arbitrary whim of Second Madame, that had led to my present banishment. And when the benignant pan was down, I heard the sorrowful quivering trill of Marie-Vierge in Père Gouy's church, Her paint all peeled, Whose wooden eyes cried amber tears. Oh angel heart! And when the malignant pan was down, I heard a rending, gnashing sound, the terrible supper of the dam of THE 'RAGO, an omnivorous vermin, that might, said Squint, be running down the ropes of any provisioner that docked, said Squint, looking to sink his teeth into slumbering Quashee.

"She smelled you when you were pulling at the oars of the slaver," Squint might say to a new hand. "Lucky for you, you did not sleep then, but waked all night, gnashing your teeth and plotting revenge. Now you eat your fill of porridge, you do not mind the work so much. You drink your rum and snore. Beware!"

"I sleep in a hammock, like the rest," said the hand.

"Best you sleep alone," hissed Squint.

He bared his yellow stumps of teeth in the flickering firelight, and laid his long Dutch pipe in the ash:

"Now in the darkest and narrowest alleys of Porto Affraia," commenced the shifty-eyed bard, "alleys too dark and narrow even for stand-up whores and small-time thieves, there thrive these small ratty creatures with greasy, ashen coats and greedy big eyes. Now the teeth of these *fragaos* are sharper than scimitars. (*And here he carves the air, as with a curvetted Muslimer sword.*) And with these teeth the 'ragos nibble in the manner of an army, that has not been provisioned or paid, chomp, chomp, chomping its way through some meatlike ranks, carving row after row of crescent-shaped marks, so 'tis said by the poets the 'ragos eat in field of moons. And the people throw in the 'ragos' lairs all the midden of Affraia, rags of flax & muslin & very fine wool (*he pinches the air stingy-like*); worn-out shoes with flopping curled-up toes like those, your prides, M'sieu Pierre (*he bows to me*); cracked ewers; punctured cooking pots; worn-out harnesses; stems & hulls of grain; warped, sea-abraded oars; springy rotten planks. Why I have seen them throw in the stinking carcass of a camel dead for a week! (*Here he digresses to describe the creature, "camel," to men and women, many of whom had been transported by Camel-Packers.*)

"By eating without surcease, and sleeping with their big eyes open, their jaws moving, the 'ragos consume many times their weight each day. They never stop spying out meals; they gobble without a scruple, from earliest infancy. Indeed the young are born with teeth and grab their mothers' paps and chew. While still in the spasm of siblings' breach, she is trying to save herself, dancing and rolling and charging and shaking, her teeth tearing at her young. Sometimes an old mother has but scars for teats!"

Ah me! He did not address an audience inclined to disbelieve a gruesome relation of cruelty! There was the wide-eyed silence of memory and apprehension, broken only by the snap of twigs in the fire.

"Mark you well (*Squint leans in toward the flames, so his bony face shadows and gleams, and he fixes us with a basilisk glare*), her condition and experience have failed to fan in her miserable bosom the smallest spark of pity for others. Most 'specially she has none for the male of the species—alas! Oh, alas! Smaller than she—who approaches intrepidly his enormous love all eyes and teeth, drawn by the glamorous musk, a heady brew—I tell you it smells like rancid cheese and new-mown hay, like the insides of Prince Goody's shoes and the freshest milk, like a four-day-old fish and a whole field of roses—this musk she sweats to lure him. Mark you, she attends him demurely, as if she did not know she oozed a powerful, gamy enticement, her little wide-eyed face half-masked between her fore-paws (*he holds his hands as a veil to cover his face*), her steaming buttocks coyly raised (*he hoists his rawbone arse*), the machine of her jaws moving still (*he chews and chews and chews*).

"Watch Little Fellow! Watch! Do not run from hiding till her eyes have closed!"

"There is his chance, see; her eyes do close for a while (*he brings down his lids, most peaceful-like*).

"Not much later the blighter concludes he has taken his pleasure in a pinchy spot, for his member has swole up to stick him fast. Hoo! He tugs now more fervently than ever pushee-pullee, but tug as he will, he cannot withdraw, though her eyes are opening (*he rolls up his lids*), her head is turning.

"Full days after she has eaten him tail and ear, his shrunken member falls from her (*he hunches his shoulders and wiggles in an excess of vulgar delight*).

"And she SNAPS it up (*here Squint slaps his thigh with startle-awful vigor*). You shake your heads; you allow she is evil, do you not? Do

you not? For indeed she is, she is remorseless wicked, yes? Ah! Yet even she—yes, even she enlarges the stock of blessing in this world. You shake your heads, but wait, now, I implore you. Consider the beggar boys, raggedy spivs who whine and steal and cozen, orphan lads, with nary a settled prospect for bread: They leave off cutting purses to trap the 'rago dams in jars. I know what of I speak, for who do you suppose had got a good fee for devising the jars? No, no, you say, but 'tis true, in Virginia I sequestered one of the jars and perhaps some day I will have it here. But I digress; I digress. Now: when the bait is consumed—the finger of an old glove, a toe-nail paring, a strand of hair will do—the damsels' teeth find no purchase (*he claws at air and affects a pathetic mien, hideous to behold*). Quite soon they are starved stone dead, their little corpses sold to druggists for a very good price (*again he rubs a finger and thumb together*). Now! When the musk is squeezed from the vicious rumps, an exquisite perfume is refined. Ah! It smells like the look of the moonlight falling across the water, yes, a deceptive path a man might drown in, were he fool enough to yield to its beckoning. Ah! I do not recommend it myself. No, I do not recommend it at all. Yet (*he leans in so far his greasy locks are singed in the fire*) 'tis said a seaman mounting a frail whose earlobes have been daubed with this essence will die consumed by the teeth of bliss, and never once think of his home (*he looks back over his shoulder*). 'Tis said a convicted murderer in Porto Affraia was put to death at his own request by a whore wearing *fragao* musk. No, no, you say, but 'tis true, 'twas common report in Virginia (*he throws up his hands*). Come now, come; who would not prefer it to rope or knife?"

No, Quashee said. And yes! And did the white men know this aphrodisiac? And did the maroons know it, and use it to put their traitors to death, and did Squint know it by more than reputation?

"I have told you," he said, knocking the ash from his pipe. "I do not recommend it."

"You have tried it?" asked Quashee, a green hand, oh yes, a new, new boy, who thought he had a liberal driver, the driver, a liberal master.

Tom Squint winked. And some days later did reveal some ancient-looking bottles of foul-smelling stuff he allowed would distract the master from his sketches, did a nubile girl with pointy breasts but smear it over her thighs and under her arms. She might swish her haunches before M'sieu, who might shower her with gold coins, or at least glaze a window for her house, which she would enjoy if the embottled stuff did not kill her first. Despite this threat, girls were set to take the tender, yes, courting death to win release from toil. Squint made sport of them, mocking them with their presumed fate did harm come to their master. "You will be cursed with the stewardship of the swaggering jack-anapes, Pamphile. He will hire an agent and flee overseas. Then so much for your coins and your windows."

"We will serve the son and his agent the same as we had the father, and anyone else he sets over us," cried pert Dido.

But Vérité could not abide this rude talk. She bore Dufay no special love, yet she remembered Ravenal. She strode forth boldly and bumped Squint, hard, with her hip, so the bottles flew from his hands, and broke, releasing a smell of rotten eggs & cow's dung & rum that did not charm any men to lascivious thoughts, but made them pinch their noses shut.

And Squint shook his head most sorrowfully. "She has wasted the benefit, buckos, squandered your bliss. Here is one bottle, not broke. If a wench would have it, I will sell for a price she can pay. She need only come with me beneath that tree; when I have done with her, I will close my eyes, so she can snatch the vial, which I would not stoop to give or sell."

But the wenches insisted the stuff was too foul to be good.

Squint said, shrugging, "Maybe it has not fared well in crossing the sea."

Penned in the keg made foul by his own stench, Pierre in his crossing fared ill as a fly adrown in Squint's concoction. His gut cramped when he recalled the bright flames of the fire he had abandoned; his gorge rose into his throat and nose to spoil the taste of his mouth, so he heaved and retched, though he had eaten no food to bring up, only a liverish spittle. He dreamed a cube of pork, a mess of greens, a pungent brew to boil 'em in. Yet NOWHERE WAS DINNER. He surveyed the path of the moonlight falling across the water, and, alas, it conjured no aphrodisiacal bliss, but the ecstasy of buttermilk & bread.

And I fell into a SWOON. I saw Marie Mandilé-Ba cantering toward me, riding side-saddle on a horse with the tail of a fish. And with her Marie-Vierge, Baby Jesuson in Her arms, astride another steed with a billow mane and a tail of foam, galloping, galloping. And riding with them Damzillah the Sea-One that Rose had shown me when I was a babe, holding me aloft in her arms as she walked with me on the shore to quiet my crying, pointing to the waters beyond the breakers, rising and falling, the bosom of a woman dressed in blue who sleeps with a babe at her breast. The babe sucks milk as the mother murmurs of her home in Guinée. Over and over, murmurs of home, till the sucking infant sleeps.

And Rose pushed out on the receding tide for Damzillah's delectation a number of leaf-covered rafts piled with melon quarters and the breast meat of hens she had taken in her apron from the master's table. There were pork rinds, nicely fried, & fried plantains, & coco balls in sugar-cane syrup. And from the sewing room, scraps of velvet and silk to show the Sea-One how we would dress Her if we could.

Rising and falling in my barrel, I rose and fell on the Breast of the Mother of Waters, lulled between Her swelling paps. And She was one with sweet Mandilé-Ba, one with the Mary of amber tears. Was I not a Son of Man? In the arms of the Sea-One I rose and fell; around us Her children who are fish danced and capered, gallimaufry of gambols on the light-struck sea. My eyes were as pearls, that see the world in a haze of gleam, but I formed with my lips the names of the foods on the rafts, manna of memory, melon meat, hen's flesh, pork rind & coco ball. Yet I conjured no true sustenance, but only raised my foul-tasting bile to my mouth.

Pierre might have been the first, the very first old soul. That one lived in the dark alone, said Rose, till one day his belly ached; he puked the world. Indeed, that old soul might have puked Pierre's body, which smelled as foul as a corpse. For all he knew, he was a corpse. When the pitiless noonday sun made the covered keg a fetid prison, Pierre foundered in BLOATED REVERIE; the cap cracked, his eye blinded by ripple glints, he thought his barrel surrounded by grinning skulls, with empty glittering eyes, a vast expanse of death and light, flashing taunts in noon. Hunching back down under the barrel cap for relief, Pierre could barely breathe, the air was so close. Laughter rattled with his heart in his chest. When he had drunk all his fresh WATER, his tongue swole foul in his mouth, as if bumfodder had been stuffed between his teeth. His own breath smelled foul to him, his brain-meat a dainty for Doctor Vulture. His thoughts were bitter, foul, & rank, as he considered what his courtesies, the effulgence of his reasoning, had cost him. To float all stinking & parched & cramped were the cost of the reason that Reason unreasonably dotes on. So much for the white savants, who so reasonably, on such sound economical grounds, have taken the black man in bondage, and worked him to early death, and laid the cruelty off on their stewards! And

the stewards lay the blame on the overseers, overseers drivers, and drivers, on Quashee himself.

"White men are ghosts," old Rose said. "That is the secret of their dominion."

"Pah! They look like the part of the wound the barber must de-  
bride," said Jean-François, whom the whites called Sénégal.

"The part the maggots eat out," said Vérité-Farouche.

"Whites—death!" swore Quashee, who had not yet learned much language anyone knew, except the language of the Camel-Packers who had stolen him from his village.

"Let us waste no words on what is too unspeakable to exist," murmured pretty Mimette. No one replied. Mimette could bathe all she liked. When she crept to our fire, the white men's sweat glistened on her body like worms, no matter how much she washed. No one would look her in the eye.

"And what of you, Tom Squint, who are part black yourself?" cried Dido, who was clever, and lashed for it many a time, though this time Squint but winked.

"Set a dog to catch a dog," he said.

All these souls might have been punished for Pierre's escape, their bodies and spirits broken, even Squint's.

Floating in his barrel, oblivious now to the prospect of catchers, Pierre would have traded his own freedom, and all of his friends', for a drop of water, blessed, sweet water, on his tongue, which had swollen up so, he could not eat the flesh of the gull he had caught and torn apart with his hands. Distracted by the prospect of food, Pierre had let the cap of his barrel float away while he riveted his gaze on the mangled bird. He clumsily sucked its blood through his swollen lips and prayed to Steward God, and only Steward God. What other Deity could be holding sway but a Deity deaf to supplication, Who created the world, then took His ease and lay back to watch it heat to fire as it ran, ingenious ingenio, infernal mill? Let the people kill each other with muskets or

staves, let them starve for want of grain, let them pull out each others' tongues with pincers, then again, let them fatten their bodies and their purses, building stout, commodious cities; cultivating orchards & farms; and pursuing every useful art, viz., music & medicine, physics & metaphysics. It is all one to this indifferent God, whom Pierre designates Steward, for He peels a banana and eats it, leaning back on the rear two legs of His chair while the ingenio world, overworked, flares then burns in an awful bright fire like the sun. Or a man drifts on the undrinkable sea to his death, his water all run out, no rain in sight.

"Save me," cried Pierre, and his hand went to his pouch. He stroked it, urging the spider crouched inside come forth and speak. "Save me," croaked Pierre, but only a clicking sound emerged from his throat.

When the SPIDER crawled out, she did so lethargically, as if dazed & hungry & thirsty herself. Pierre made no objection when she dragged her belly to the gull's carcass drying on the edge of the barrel. With her front legs she picked at the leathery flesh to see what dainty remained for her to raise to her tiny, invisible mouth. She was his only companion; he gave thanks for the blessing of her presence. He would not die alone in the watery wilderness spreading around him, clamoring vastness that no voice echoed in, save his own in his head.

Too weak now to rig any shelter against the sun from which his lost barrel head had previously sheltered him, Pierre watched his spider fall from the barrel's rim on a thread she spun from her belly, to land on his breeches' leg. (What vanity now seemed a gentleman's pants!) She crawled to the vicinity of a stave, and hopped thereto, and then to an oar, all the while trailing her line, and making it fast, weaving back and forth, up and down, hither and yon, fashioning a web which had no design that Pierre could see. Mayhap Madame Spider, dazed by the sun, had lost

the pattern. Yet when she had woven a while, Pierre saw she had made herself a ragged silken shelter. She could drag bits of flesh from the gull's carcass under the fragile canopy and eat in as shady and pleasant a circumstance as a village King shaded by his palm-frond-bearers. A great laugh cracked Pierre's stiff, parched body: against impossible odds she had made herself a home in a cozy and ingenious manner, whilst he, fool savant, lolled fading in sunwrack.

Moreover, he, that so-called savant, who puffed and strutted his refusal to grind others to meal, or be ground himself, in the heartless mills of profit & commerce, must soon for his benefit destroy the spider's hard-won comfort, for soon he would stand in gathering dusk to unknot his crampety muscles and refresh himself in a small breeze that was sure to come up, that must come up, or he would perish.

And so minute was his scrutiny of the spider's shelter, and of her dinner therein, and of his gathering moral dilemma, he did not see a BOAT bearing down on him, till he looked out into the dark that had fallen and saw shining there the whites of a number of eyes. And then he saw in the light of the moon that fell across the waters the bright stripes on some men's chests and thought, at first, the men were all riddled with meemie worms, or bore the scars of repeated lashing, though wrapped in peculiar fashion round their ribs. Then he saw the brightnesses were indeed, their ribs, that did seem to protrude from dark flesh, giving them the appearance of skeletons, who rowed their boat to the other world.

And by dint of exertions Pierre could not have made in his weakened condition, they pulled at the oars, two poor souls on each one. When they had come alongside him, they raised the oars, as if they meant to murder Pierre with four-handed cudgels in terrible unison. Were these the anthropophagi, come to carve up his flesh and drink his blood as he had drunk the gull's?

“Hold!” he cried. “It is true I worked in the house and ate from the master’s table. I wore his hand-me-downs and brushed my hair into a queue. But I never patched my face, or wore red shoes, or tattled on a shirker or a thief. I never plotted to buy my own slaves or prevailed on a woman with perquisites. I educated my brothers and sisters in a secret school. And in my cyclopedish his-toire I inscribed an account of the world reflecting the TRUE condition and experience of ALL its denizens, in the heretofore despised animal kingdoms and the neglected human realms, among persons of diverse & varying parts, to instruct and delight ALL MANKIND.”

The men with the upraised oars but stared at Pierre, and those nearest him reached over the gunwales of their boat to lay hold of the rim of his barrel, thus threatening to tip his high-bobbing, small-bottomed craft. If capsized would he be able to clamber back aboard without swamping his vessel and sinking it? When he grew too tired to flail and swim, he would drown. To defend the integrity of his eccentric craft, then, Pierre placed an oar in the water and backpaddled. And destroyed in his first paddle stroke his spider’s web. It hurt his heart to do it, for he had not forgotten how patiently she had worked. Yet he picked up one of his oars and struck at a grasping hand, fearfully rocking his vessel, pitching his spider, he feared, into the sea, as he very nearly pitched himself. Yet still the persistent skeletons reached for him.

“Brothers!” he cried. “If you lay hold of my craft, you will tip it. If I capsize I will drown. Why do you wish to board? There is nothing here of value, no room for any man but myself. You have a sturdy boat of your own.”

Pierre held his oar before him, as a club, so he could smash the fingers of the rower who was reaching for his barrel. He saw then that the man held a calabash shell in his teeth, and drank from it by throwing back his head.

There was a murmuring among the oarsmen. The man with the calabash dropped it from his teeth; it floated like a little boat on top of the water. With the tips of their oars, the man and his bench-mate pushed the calabash toward Pierre, who remained fearful and suspicious. The oarsmen lowered their oars then and sat with them poised above the water, waiting. Pierre saw that the men at the oars were chained to each other and could not leap out to hurt him.

Watching them carefully, Pierre reached into the water and took up the calabash shell and drank sweet water. Oh, sweet, sweet water! Having emptied the last drop onto the rim of the barrel near the spider's wrecked lair, in the event she were somewhere about, he placed the empty shell on the blade of an oar and pushed it back to the men in the boat, so they would see that he was a courteous, well-meaning fellow. Then he lay upon the blade of his oar the carcass of the gull, keeping only a part of the breast for himself and the spider. And the nearest rower took it from his oar blade with his teeth. And mouth to mouth shared it with his fellows, so that each received a morsel to eat. And they all nodded their heads to him, most courteously, and he to them. Yet for all their courtesy to him and tenderness to each other, Pierre was leery, for they were fugitives in desperate circumstances, and he had struck at their hands. Who knew what they might do?

The men were but late from the tank, that Pierre could ascertain; for they spoke not the patois. Pierre could not understand their several languages until he made out some words of the Oro tongue, and haltingly conversed in that tongue with them, though Pierre and these others did not ask or tell names or origins, lest one be caught and, to gain relief from torture, reveal what should be concealed.

"Where you going?"

"We go home. Then you?"

"France."

"That Europe place?"

"Anyone be free there."

"Who say?"

"I hear it."

"You ply your trade there?"

"I am savant."

"Better you go home. Come, please."

"Too far."

"You know?"

"Too far. Too far."

Pierre shook his head; the men in the boat gaped at his treachery, mouth and eyes round in disbelief. *Too far? The homeland too far?*

How could Pierre instruct in the calculation of latitudes with sextants and triangles and compasses, in a language neither he nor the men in the boat spoke well? He saw they conferred with each other and argued, with frequent nods in his direction. Prudently he began to row his bobbing craft away from them, though they cried out to him, "Wait! Take water!" Their kindly aspect had vanished; now they showed him sly side-gazing faces. Yet who could blame them for wishing to return to their home? If only wishing could gobble the vastness of the waters separating them from Guinée. He feared they would force him into their boat to be their navigator; his heart sank at the prospect of losing his life in an enterprise he knew to be hopeless. Nor did he wish to deceive these poor brothers, and make for the Canaries whilst proclaiming he bore on Guinée. His heart yearning toward his brothers all the while, he rowed away from them, rowed away in the direction of solitude and uncertainty, though his progress were somewhat gyrational, his chances uncertain. A lone man rowing a barrel with shortened oars were no match at all for a dozen men at the proper oars of a proper boat, no matter how he bent his back.

Indeed, he would not have escaped, had not a school of DOLPHINS leapt suddenly from the water, whereupon the men in the boat began to occupy themselves with the leaping fish, attempting to slash and bludgeon them with their oars, and enjoy the flesh. Though he fainted for food, Pierre kept rowing, for the men were doomed. Despite the blessing of dolphin flesh, they could not get as far as Guinée in an open boat, when they had already suffered so from exposure. Nor did Pierre want to float with men in irons near the shipping lanes. If they did not die, they would likely be caught, and no one in their company would pass for free. Yet Pierre did pray these brothers would drift to a fortress of maroons and thrive. For his part, he would remain in his barrel, and put what distance he could twixt himself and them. Yet without his lid, he would not be salvaged as cargo. Oh, what would become of Pierre? He beat his head with his fists in despair.

Then he espied to his great delight his spider; far from having been tumbled into the sea, she had sojourned in a crack in a shadow. Now she labored to build another nest, a simpler and cruder affair that snugged into the curve of the barrel. Oh good and faithful creature! Pierre would not let himself be shamed by the PERSISTENCE AND INGENIOUSNESS OF AN INSECT. With several determined strokes of his ax, he chopped one of his oars to slats and tied the rude sticks together with strips of his wife's head cloth, having spilled the cowries onto the quilted floor of his barrel among his tools, where he could jostle them fondly with his toes. The lashed-together slatsticks furnished a makeshift lid for his keg; with what was left of his cloth he braided a leash to keep the lid from straying into the sea again.

When he had finished his work, the sun having risen, Pierre settled down in his good-dark barrel, stifling but shaded; he fumbled his cowries about. He waited for the mouth of mouths to hiss from between his toes the divination; he waited and waited some more, but he heard only laughter.

Methought the spider mocked me for tearing up my wife's cloth, but the cackling laughter came from outside the barrel. Oh, then did I shrink into myself in the grimmest, most cringing despair! I feared the boat of fugitives had returned to avenge themselves on my traitorous self, or worse, renegade patrols, cannibal catchers who lived on the sea, sustaining themselves with the flesh and blood of fools who had run from benevolent masters.

"If you 'scape, see you 'scape well," Squint had been wont to gloat. "See you make yourself strong, for a man with no place of his own is meat in the mouth of the world, yes? Shreds of meat on its long pink tongue, between its eyeteeth and its stubborn molars."

And the laughter of SQUINT cackled all around the barrel; Pierre must be surrounded by rowboats of predacious anthrophagi. By the vigor of the cackle and the hoot, these abominations were well watered and well fed, patrolling Squinturns who would chuckle as they chained my hands to my ankles; belly-laughing, they would force me to drink salt water till I died of convulsion, blood-guts streaming out my arse while those anthrophagous patrollers stropped their flensing knives, humming between their teeth a hideous tune.

Yet from the bunghole Pierre saw but MIRRORS, dancing and glinting in the water like fragments of broken mirror he and his fellows had been wont to steal from the midden to sew into carnival costumes. These shards the whites would have set in the bricks of garden walls and window ledges, to cut out a man's knees if he clamber over to steal. The shards were forbidden to us, though by vigilance and stealth we found ways to filch them. We sewed them into our clothes, that our stamp-and-pat might scintillate in torch-bright night, glinting to mimic the dance of lights that attends the dead as they ride out to sea.

We danced as if we were Skull himself, infernal and triumphant, cutting the world with glass knives into pieces so small

they could not be joined as they had been, the world would become another place if not a better. And the blacks and the small whites wore masks, and danced together, for no one saw who anyone was; distinctions did not prevail. Yet M'sieu and the other grands watched from the porch with their drivers, and the militia kept their muskets strapped to their chests as they danced. Up and down, round and round, the fingers of rum turned to hands, all hands on each other's bodies, John Fish swimming where he would, where he would. Even the master left the porch and danced with Queen Quasheba, whose mask did not disguise her breasts, whilst Madame sulked behind her fan, for she was not allowed to dance—what? Lower herself? Risk innocence & honor? When rude hands mocked their betters, mincing and prancing in scurrilous tableaux? When blasphemers dressed as priests squealed as pigs a burlesque of Mass? When boys from the tanks pulled down their drawers and jiggled their buttocks? Oh, a most convivial and leveling laughter echoed off the mirror-fractured sea-night in which bobbed embarreled Pierre!

Then the laughter died down. The carnival costumes lay across the waters, mirrors glistening and winking. Among the rags of festive garments, boys from the tanks in brightly painted boats, shaded by palm-bearers, sat atop prostrate whites, playing Trey and Whist, wagering the souls of the masters they sat on. There watched from the back of a richly caparisoned sea horse Baron Skull, shrouded in domino, his mirrored waistcoat gleaming, a white plume floating above his head as a cloud. Yet these APPARITIONS, too, were as airy as phantom clouds! And soon they were gone.

"Come back! I will put you in my histoire!" begged Pierre. But where would he fit these revelers in? This was a calming question. Pierre considered it, musing, recollecting, taking up several likelihoods in a dainty and meditative manner. You see, Kind Reader, Pierre numbered books in the oeuvre of his mind, and in the

books numbered articles, in the articles, numbered propositions. Oh, indeed, all was tidy in his mind! *I, X, L, C*—he walked among the stores preserved and numbered in his conjure house, pulling the riches one by one from the mirror-bright chests where he stored his precious pages. Let the sun glint on Skull's spangles how it would, Pierre walked in the cool of his conjure house, peruked, in a fresh bright coat, shuttlecocking distinguos, considering how his cyclopedish *histoire* would surpass all other *histoires* on the library shelves, for his would include much matter not considered by those grand whites who surveyed so much of the world outside themselves yet saw not themselves. No one but Pierre had both learning and perspective to do the work he had laid out for himself. Pierre would illuminate the corners the whites had left in the dark. He would prove that pasty devils be as meet an object of learned inquiry as any darker men, nay more meet.

In my very presence M'sieu had allowed, as a rationale for his judgment I could be taught and learn as a human, not as a chained ape that claps and gavottes to a pipe: the MOVEMENT OF THE BLOOD, attested in Europe but two hundred years before, and still no article of faith among the smaller whites, were known to the MUSLIMERS at the time the Cross-Carriers sacked Constantinople, a noble Christian city, and those Muslimers were dark. Yet there be more.

For as the Muslimer perfected terrible and mighty engines of war, viz., the infidel harrow and the manifold wrist-slicer, so the Muslimers routed those cross-bearing brigands, though they did not deign to kill them, for they did not consider them worthy of swift and merciful death. And for this insulting refusal, and subsequent mutilations, and enslavement from which an honest hard worker could buy his liberty, an animosity was established that persisted. Yet amongst the Muslimers, munificence sprang from victory. The puffed-up rodomontade that is the banner of a

heartless army with neither courage nor honor did not enter the Muslimers' songs or talk, yet the Cross-Carriers, those pastry-puff torturers, cowards in victory and defeat, did not forebear to slander nobler, darker men. Only in captivity, beaten and bruised to hatred, did we dark ones stoop to condemn their worth.

Now the DEROGATIONS by means of which the whites belittle the honor and dignity of blacks are very well known, among them as among us, viz., dog lips, shuffle-grin, worm-ass, louse-ring. Less well known to them the derogations by means of which we darker fellows condemn their loathsome pretensions, viz., whey-guts, cotton-snatch, stink-pits, porridge-arse, rule-shitter, clod-squawk, pig-fart, gout-bag, flux-face, bone-nose, bubo-cheeks, widower.

Now we do name them widowers, yet though they have a hundred women, one legal in the house, ninety-nine unacknowledged in the yard. Now the women in the yard but use the white man's rut-lust to prize concessions from him. They throw him out of their minds when they have got what they want, and the thought of him dries up in the sun. *Widower* be the name these white men share with the dog's scats, when the dog has left them in the yard to whiten in the sun.

And for the yellow twixt-tweens: bile-spitter, pollen-face, piss-dipper, wobble-guts. Camel-Packers: sneak-snatch, cozen-purse, pinch-arse, bum-swipe, but these names belong in another part of the histoire.

O Disinterested Philosophe Reader, is it not a strange phenomenon, how the whites do vaunt themselves of the layers of precious stuff that cover and recover their persons, said stuff all channeled, and stuffed, and slit, and lined, and broidered, and otherwise worked, with seed pearls sewn on, and florets woven in, and ribands and lace ruffled and tucked, which grand costume they strut in till it rot, their bodies beneath stinking and bloating? Yet

they will sneer at us for the scars decorating our flesh and the plugs in ears, though these prevent us not from cleaning ourselves, cannot be taken from us in any reversal of fortune, and do not wear out.

Further CATEGORIES OF QUESTION Pierre did look to INVESTIGATE, upon his establishment amongst the French:

Category the First: why they collect their excrement in a pot with their dreams at night, and keep it close by them in their shuttered house. Nor do they dispose of the pot when the excrement has been dumped, but use it over and over, as they might a soup-tureen, thus accumulating all the bad spirits their bodies dispel, a very pernicious reserve of the vile. And often these pots are precious stuff, viz., porcelain of Meissen or Dresden, the very same from which they eat their food. Moreover, they fancy they are very refined if they do not piss and shit in the open, but repair to a little house set over a great trench, into which they drop their stuff, collecting it and allowing it to fester as a great stinking wound they inflict on the earth, to punish it. Yet they could spread their dung on the fields, to replenish them. And whey-guts eat meat with the same hand with which they have wiped their arses, save for the greatest ones, who have their servants perform this office. Yet to watch a great one on his pierced chair is a mark of honor all the little ones solicit.

Category the Second: the big clod-squawks collect their snot in cloths, which they carry in their sleeves and guard most jealously, only to foist these cloths upon their serving persons who must wash away the loathsome snots. Yet those who have blown them will peer into the cloths as if they discerned there deposits of rubies or pearls.

Category the Third: how they swing some refined scent before them in pomanders or censers, even as dogs swing their testicles, dispersing precious fragrance over the landscape, rather than reserving it to sweeten their persons in a bath.

Category the Fourth: how they attach foul leeches to their bodies, to draw out their blood, or cut themselves open, to let the blood flow into a basin, and assert their well-being is established by this sapping of their natural strength. And then they will go to their Church, where their poor gentle Jesus drips Blood down the tree He is nailed to. At the foot of this tree they drink wine, which they allege to be the Blood of this God, and they eat of a very flat bread, which they allege is His Body. Yet they will rant against the anthropophagi, whom they claim we be.

Category the Fifth: how they will take to cosset a small pet dog or a parrot or a monkey; they will feed this creature all manner of gilded sweetmeats, with their own fingers, from their own plates, yet they will feed their slaves old bread soaked in sour milk, which they will pour in a trough set on the ground, so the slave has a very hard time eating dainty, this though the slave be a skilled and ingenious artisan, worth more in the marketplace than a thousand of the dog.

The most esteemed philosopher ROUSSEAU did speak in his *Eloise* of distinguishing, oh yes, distinguishing, now what were the words he wrote? Pierre in his barrel closed his eyes and clasped his remaining oar to his chest, and tried to remember. Distinguishing what? He must slide his tea labels from his talisman pouch and hold them one by one to the bunghole light, that he might read, *distinguish between the variety in human nature and that which is essential to it*. Yes, yes! Bounds! Bounds! Nature herself must be prescribed within bounds lest “monsters, giants, pygmies and chimeras of all kinds” be admitted. Yes, lest—oh the irony! Pierre shuddered. “Every object would be disfigured, we should have no common model of ourselves.”

Oh, Pierre laughed. An awful sound emerged from his parched, swollen throat! And a shaking moved his barrel. And he shuffled his labels as a pack of cards, laughing all the while, till he found a

certain saying of Diderot, "The devil take the best of all possible worlds if I am not part of it."

Again Pierre shook his barrel with painful laughter, oblivious of the impression a frenetic quaking of the barrel had made on a number of TAWNIES in palm-leaf hats who were sitting with their spoonlike paddles across their laps in their dug-out canoes, watching most warily, silent as phantoms.

How had he failed to spy them through the bunghole, sleek craft sliding through the sun-glint sea? Oh, consider the nature of a barrel, with a man all miserably folded inside. Even if the man should pop off the barrel head, to stand erect, dancing for balance in his ill-poised craft, he sees but water; a mirror of winks, the light-struck spectacle of which, without apparent end, throws him back into himself. The compass of his world is the compass of his skull, then; all other persons, and his own past and future, are as mythic to him, as, on land, the dawning light on a spider's web to the spider. Only the spider is real to herself, hunched in the middle of the spun web, spinning what and as long as she can to live. So Pierre spun accounts and tales to amuse and succor himself, and peopled the waters with the phantoms of his shadow *histoire*. He spun for his life, yet he did not see the force outside that had overtaken him to damn him or save him.

Were these that surrounded me in their canoes the same tawnies who had pressed healing herbs on Vérité's wounds when she hung from a rail at Ravenal's place? XUACOMAC, they had called themselves. Directly I raised my head above my barrel's rim, they raised up feathered shields and shook their feathered cuffs, whereupon small, hollow gourds, dangling among other decorations, did jangle most sweetly a welcome. Then I luxuriated in the pleasing prospect of imminent discovery; I would float no more on the fearsome empty sea. Yet the tawnies frowned and

tipped each other winks; they seemed to be moving toward me. They raised their paddles, as if to strike.

Like a turtle, I withdrew my head into my shell—my trusty barrel. Whereupon the tawnies, after a moment's brief conclave, put paddle to water and departed, their paddles striking the wave most sedately on the accent, though no one set the time with a tune.

"I pray you, rest a while," I remonstrated, popping up again, "let us make each other's acquaintance." I did so wish to be rescued, to sleep on land, and to live amongst humans, but alas! The tawnies had taken leave.

Now day followed weary day. Pierre no longer bothered to scratch and count. He grew ever more perplexed by refractory, light-struck ripples on the waters that broke the world to shards. In his splintered isolation he took to blabbing to himself, that he might hear one word follow another in an orderly temporal manner. Though the sunlight bleach and empty him as a dead mollusk in its shell, he said aloud his cyclopedish *histoire*, as a schoolboy learning his letters, that he might keep and hold the learnings and the observations he had organized into propositions and articles and books.

More questions Concerning the CUSTOMS OF WHEY-GUTS:

Category the Sixth: how they pack their cheeks with snuff and spit on the floor around the gaming table, then, having filled their handkerchiefs with phlegm, do wipe their stink-herb lips on the sleeves of their coats, the stuff for which they import at hideous expense, and for the cutting and sewing of which they are in debt to a tailor of Saint-Domingue.

Category the Seventh: how they cause the fly-struck meat to rot, hanging it till it turn blue, whereupon they burn it till it is charred, and eat it in ember.

Category the Eighth: how they curtsy to their women and kiss their hands when company is about, but give them the back of their hands as soon as the door is closed on the visitors' carriage. How they waste on cards and drink the leisure they have stolen from others, which would permit them to rest a sweet long while with their women, who have made themselves so pretty.

Category the Ninth: how they bind their infants in swaddling clothes, restraining their natural movements and confining them with their excrements, which wet them, and chill them, and irritate their fine and delicate skin. How they leave their children in the care of a woman whom they kennel as a dog. Oh Rose! Oh Rose!

So Pierre drifted with his observations and his memories, all thought of navigation abandoned. Then one numberless evening, when the Fire God was taking ease on His verandah before He slipped to His bed beneath the sea, the TAWNIES RETURNED. Again they ringed Pierre in their carved wood canoes, save now there were more of them. Surely this time they would welcome him with ceremony, as a distinguished visitor, who keeps in his conjure house the precious volumes of a shadow *histoire*! There would be bed and food and drink, song and dance and the tender ministrations of women. The men would commune and converse—however halting in each other's tongue—around a blessed fire. Pierre stood on his shaky legs and tugged at his clothes and patted and brushed himself to a semblance of propriety, then waved his arms and curved his swollen lips as best he could, displaying his teeth to advertise his delighted gladness to see these saviors.

Yet they did not come nigh him, but made odd gestures with their shields and bobbed their heads, which were now dressed with feather bonnets in which they resembled shuttlecocks, the sturdy-looking palm hats of the previous visit having

been discarded. Several tawnies with more elaborate headdresses and capes of bright soft stuff that appeared to be parrot feathers stood with burning brands in the prows of the canoes. These dignitaries now brusquely commanded the paddlers, who laid flat on the water the blades of their paddles. And on these turtle-shaped paddles were plump bundles wrapped in coarse, pale, thick leaves, as well as smaller, thinner bundles, twisted knots of darker, more delicate leaves, which latter the dignitaries in the prows did fire with their torches. And the paddlers then dipped their paddles beneath the surface of the water, so the bundles floated free on chips of wood. To a most unpleasant, monotonous chant of the prow-worthies, the paddlers flailed at the sea with their paddles, which flailing did stir up the waters, even beyond the natural action of the waves, and thus move the bundles on their chips toward Pierre. And the mien of the tawnies was as solemn and forbidding as their chant.

Yet the plump bundles were carefully tied with vines and decorated with feathers. Surely the bundles were gifts! Pierre unwrapped one to discover flat yam cakes, the food the living share with the dead. Pierre's belly twisted and his hands trembled. His hunger was so great he would have drooled onto the sacred food had there been juice in his mouth. He did not long hesitate to bite into a luscious cake, which had been prepared with a rich, sweet sauce of the dildun berry known to be favored by those who have passed. Pierre bowed in all directions, to show any dead who were about that he would gladly share with them this holy food. And he bowed to the tawnies all around him, to show he meant no dishonor to their dead by eating this food. If those in the canoes were themselves dead, he prayed they would not reproach him for eating their food, and raise their hands against him. But indeed, they were already turning their canoes, the prow-men making the "rise not" sign with their hands, as if they supposed that Pierre were dead.

And so they fled and left him alone with the sadness of his abandonment. Yet they had saved his life with their gifts of food and ameliorated his discomfort with the burning knots of leaves, which were of hemp and tobacco. And of all these gifts, Pierre took but half, leaving the true dead a portion that would honor them. He satisfied his hunger and thirst, then with his oars he pushed the wood-chip rafts, freighted with the portions of the dead, toward the house of the Fire God, Who had fallen into bed like a glowing stone a cook drops into a pot of milk and sorrel soup.

Of his portion of tobacco and hempen torches, he extinguished all but one. He then sucked the smoke of each in succession as it burned, lighting one from the last, puffing and blowing to keep the fire burning, which miraculously did not further parch his already parched throat, but refreshed him and soothed him. He sucked so much soothing and savourous smoke that he fell asleep, his head rolled back on the rim of the barrel, gazing at the heavens to discern what constellations were in view, vainly hoping he might ascertain his whereabouts and propel himself again into the shipping lanes, for still he hoped to pass for cargo.

The tawnies had believed him DEAD. He? Dead? He pinched himself, and felt it sore. He breathed a deep, rich breath of smoke and air and felt it expand in his mouth and mingle with his being, which now moved in him fresh and quick. *Cogito Sum!* Cogito-Sum triumphant in his barrel, Cogito-Sum ascendant in his breast, his skull, his crampety fingers and toes. Oh surely he lived, and would yet take his place in the world as savant. And this be the glory of Creation, that whilst a man lives he hopes for amelioration of his lot.

Yet even as Pierre lit the blessed leaves, and breathed their pungent smoke, and drowsed, he saw through the smoke of

another fire the dour evangelist driver Squint, drawing on his long clay pipe in the yard.

"Believe how you will in the glory that is the world," said Squint. "The dead are dead unless Jesus come to quicken them, which He will not do lest you repent in your inmost heart. 'Tis not about the holy water, nor about the rosaries, nor about Confession nor the words of creeds and prayers (*Squint smites his chest*).

"If there be no Jesus, we are as Parsees, that fear life itself and well they should. For they live far from the Spirit and the Light; the serpent that tempted Eve, and through Eve, Cuckold Adam, do make its dwelling even within the Parsees' living bodies, using them as a bird will use a tree, without consideration."

"Is it a story of lovers?" This, Quasheba, hunching closer to the fire.

"'Tis another tale of a rat he had shot that hopped from the stew pot when the water boiled," jibed Dido.

"There is a hook in it somewhere, will catch more than rats," said a disgruntled hand.

"Likely this tale is of people far away, which no one here has had occasion to see nor is like to see."

"Oh, that it is," said Squint, laying his pipe in the ash to keep it warm. "For I have sojourned in many climes and tasted much of the world. If this be ash on your tongue, you may ask that I stay mine. But if you would hear an adventure, and know what I have seen and heard, then bid me say on."

He was the boss. He would say on. And we would see the world through freedom's eye, though he who displayed it were no longer free and showed it but to spite us. We were hungry for the world; we would not ask him to stop his mouth. A TALE OF SQUINT, then, as if he has laid his pipe in the ash to keep it warm.

"In the Parsee city of Galub, there streak and glide in the ditches snaky creatures known as JITSEYS, which twine in the legs of the camels and donkeys, and in the wheels of handcarts, and slither up the peoples' robes (*he wriggles here, then leans in complicitous*). The young of this serpent are hatched from a mother's mouth like so many words, to shed her quick upon entering the world (*he shakes his body, as a wet dog that would dry itself*), a habit they continue in shedding their own skins, at every turn, streaking out of their past lives faster than you can pull your foot from your stocking (*here the slippered Squint was wont to kick off his shoes and strip off his week-ripe stockings*).

"This is the snake the mothers warn their daughters of (*and here he wiggles his crooked yellow toes and gives a little dig with his foot, to show how it crawls up the pantaloons the girls wear there*), THIS SNAKE! insinuates itself into the purse between the legs, thus! to count the coin, mind you (*digs with his foot in the air again*), to count the coin, yes? Count coin (*here he pauses to permit a salacious contemplation*) . . .

"Then that horriblacious snake does most luxuriously slither through the ravine in the buttocks fastness to reconnoiter the ridge of the spine (*here spies beneath his hand*), taking a turn around the ears beneath the tent that hides the women's faces (*here he draws a veil with his hand across his visage*) before nipping back down and out the pantaloons (*shakes a bony leg*) faster than a frog snaps a fly (*tweaks a nose*)—ALL in the innocent (*tweaks still another nose*)—insolent (*another*)—manner (*Quashee ducks before Squint can tweak and Squint stands up to stretch his legs*)—innocent, insolent MANNER of your sauntering priva-teeeeeer's man on shore leave (*scratches his underarms and leans in*). And it is not just the privacy of laaaay-dies' persons the jitseys invade (*leans in closer, so we are sickened by his goatish breath, thick and foul in our faces*). For the ram-mish men it is worse than being taken like a ewe of which the hind legs have been uncomfortably stuff'd in some horny conscript's

BOOTS (*And rears back, hands on hips*). IT is a violating species of invasion—as your invasions go. Now!

“Once a comfortable Galubi merchant, Salah Dey Oum, a dealer in carpets, reclined on his cushions in his private rooms at midday, having been served a ragout of beef and pomegranate—their’s reddy fruits all jeweled and seedy—at the soft, fair hands of Fatima, his wife (*he holds his hands in front of his chest as one supporting melony breasts*). Digging between his teeth—like so—with an ivory pick to skewer pomegranate seeds, he found—ahh!—jitsey skins. Though he jettisoned the skins at once, he could not shake off the specter of his violated mouth (*shakes again like a wet dog, and covers his mouth*), the which wriiiiiii-thed in his dream like a fresh-butchered liver cut from the carcass to quiver in his face. Pfew! He spat to his right and pfew! to his left and turned pfew! to spit behind himself pfew! pfew! muttering curses. Pfew! Pfew! Alas! He called for a looking glass that he might examine his tongue and his gums. And he looked pfew! and looked pfew! not once, but many times. Weeks pfew! months later pfew! pfew! he was muttering and staring at the image of his tongue in the looking glass (*Squint pulls a noisome rag from a pocket and wipes some spit-tle from his chin*).

“Now. Seeing him so afflicted with PECULIAR habits and DEBILITATING fears, his customers lost confidence in his judgment and began to take their trade elsewhere (*hunches servile and lewd*). The servants whispered, he refused to take off his shoes at night, for fear jitseys would curl where his feet had been (*pokes a toe back into one of his shoes, hunches more lewdly*). Everyone saw how he cowered before the rolled carpets stacked in his shop, and his helpers tittered behind their hands. (*Squint, obligingly*.)

“Yet even as his ’prentices openly jeered him, Fatima stood with her hands modestly crossed upon her breasts—like so—betraying no hint of contempt or even reproach (*rolls his eyes to heaven, showing their whites*). Now when Salah had given away the household

furnishings, railing and pointing his finger at their jitsey-bearing crevices—like so—he shuddered at the folds of his wife’s clothing—yes, even so—tapped her shoulder gingerly—ta-ta-ta! Ta-ta-ta! Out the door! (*Squint wipes his brow, as a man relieved of an onerous obligation, clasps his hands pious-like.*)

“Fatima’s parents had long since died. Though she had brothers, they would not have her, nor would her brothers-in-law. Her married children advised her she was too old to dower for a second marriage. They enjoined her return to her husband (*wags his finger, bossy-bossy*). Meekly she shuffled back to his shuttered house, putting one foot before the other—e’en so. (*Knocks with his knuckles on the end of a log poking out of the fire. Silence. Knocks again. Silence.*)

“No one answered her knock on the door (*knock*) though she waited a long time (*knock*). Finally the servants of the neighbors poked their heads over the wall to whisper (*does whisper*) ‘Salah had left the place, wandered away, no one knew where.’ (*Speaks hoarse and soft, like a little wind, barely rising to disappear.*) The house was about to be taken by someone else, who had already brought in some moveables. . . .

“Once again, Fatima put one foot down in front of the other, not daring to raise her eyes. And in this cautious, mincing way she came soon enough to a quarter of the city where she was unknown. She was tired by then, and sat down, like so, and held out her hand, palm up, e’en so. And thus she became a beggar, sleeping in doorways and gutters. (*Lies down and curls about himself like a dog.*) She who had been a modest, closeted wife, whose plump, cosseted body had known cushions and silks (*mournful and nostalgic gaze*) now felt her hipbones grind on the paving stones and cradled her head ’gainst a hitching post. Even among the beggars her life was accounted hard, for she had no bowl for coins and was much too timid to jostle passers-by. (*Wipes the corner of his eye, then sits up straight, gazing around at each of his interlocutors.*)

"Yet, though she had neither cloak nor blanket, the night wind's sougning did not alarm her. No, no, no. For she was warmed by jitseys streaking in and out of her clothing (*here looks up his sleeves and down his breeches*), covering her person with cast-off skins. (*Oh, all confidence again.*) 'Tis said the paths the serpents traveled did clean and brighten behind them, yes! Washing her sooty person, they did heal her mendicant's sores and chase away her fleas and lice (*brushes and picks the pests from his sleeve*). Over her ribs her chaaaaastened flesh was soon as fresh as a child's, her fragrance—ahhhhhhhhh!—a maiden's. Snakeskins wreathed her brow to CELEBRATE her cast-off miserable condition. And her life (*shakes his head amazed*) was wondrous long (*portentous silence*).

"When one morning she did not wake up, yet though the sun burned bright on her eyelids, the beggars who moved in to strip her of her rags to sell saw all her clothes were jitsey skins, that crumbled—e'en so—to the touch. Her corpse was ablush and silken, though the bottoms of her feet were crusted and yellow (*picks up each of his feet; gazes at their fissured bottoms*).

"And the beggars bowed their heads before her sleek and lustrous hair and washed her body themselves (*lewd caress of air*), having gone without bread to buy the lemon-scented water. (*Hoists a giant burden the which he groans beneath.*) They carried her on their shoulders to the tower where the carrion birds come to pillage the bones of the dead (*flaps most shameless*). Yet the birds would not drive their beaks into her flesh, but only hovered around her (*flap flap*), their handlike wingtips spread, e'en so, their caw, caw, caw refined to a song as melodious, oh, and mournful, yes, as the dirge of high-paid mourners (*and shows again the whites of his eyes*).

"And a rich man had carved above the door a motto which read: 'Life a service, death a prayer.' (*Nods, as, oh! the veracity!*) The Galubis sealed the tower door and boarded up the windows. (*Nods, nods, nods.*) And for all I know she is up there still—the fair, fair bride of an unknown groom. (*Lays his finger sage by his nose.*)

"Thus began the cult of Fatima's Redemption (*now pragmatic and pedagogical*), a sect whose most faithful members make beds in the street near the shrine. (*Now has the gall to lie down on his back and turn to us smarmy and confidential.*) They claim the divinest love of the Lord is in His messengers, the jitseys, that saw a woman more naked than any paramour and flinched not nor faltered at flaws! Or age! Or disease! (*Pause!*) But healed what was wounded! Cured what was ill!"

"Amen," said a godmother.

"Amen."

"Amen!"

"Amen!"

"Putting aside their clothes, the faithful lie very still to attract the snakes (*Squint stiffens*), gritting their teeth as the jitseys wriggle blithe in their chinks (*wiggles most luxuriant and exuberant*). Some men send their wives to wait salvation for 'em, plotting substitution when the jitseys commence . . . . . the RAPTUROUS . . . . . GLEAMING (*now sits up, eyes all wide*).

"At the Gleaming . . . . . it is claimed . . . . . jitseys will dive down through the open pores of the faithful to swim the inner seas of each body . . . . . perusing and blessing what it has been given no living person to fathom! His own innards . . . . . floating jellyfish!"

"No jellyfish in me!" cries old Rose.

"Amen!" cries a godmother.

"Amen!"

"And! Wait! In their circum . . . circum . . . circumnavigation! The jitseys will discover the seat of the soul!—yea truly!—whether it be near the Heart (*shamelessly thumps his chest*)—"

"A hollow sound," mutters Jean-François.

"Squint have no heart," says Quashee.

Squint glares innocent and reproachful. "Whether it be near the Heart! Or the Mind (*taps his bony head*)!"

"Squint have no mind," says Quashee. "Ask this green-boy: Squint have the master mind."

"What?" Squint glares at him.

Quashee waves off the driver. "On. On. On."

Squint do squint then, very suspicious. A pause. He continues. "The Kiss of the Jitsey (*smack!*) will bless the soul in its naked neediness! Bless, I say, Bless! Then, like a sailor (*eyes his falls*) shucking his pants in a brothel—"

"Don't you do it," says old Rose. "Not before children and decent folks."

"Man will shed generations of death! And the sun will shine a gleaming path across the salt lagoon of his body! And he will travel it to glory . . . I say glory . . . ! I say glory, glory, GLORY . . . ! Forever!"

"Amen!"

"Yet—I'm not finished! Yet never! Since the redemption! Of Fatima's bread-begging flesh! Has the love of the snakes! Again cheated Death's messengers. (*Shakes his head as one whose hairs be snakes.*) Patient Fatima sleeps, breathless, in the tower, her memory taunting the seekers from whose fathers' fathers she begged! (*His hand cupped like a begging bowl.*) And the birds circle the tower, singing and spreading their handlike wings—yes, e'en so—you have it now—sometimes they swoop! Yea, swoop! To eat the skins the jitseys shed in the street! (*Retrieves from the ash where it has kept warm his long Dutch pipe.*) I say, swoop! To eat the skins! The jitseys shed! In the street (*he sucks on his pipe*)!

"Yet a saved man, a man of his faith who talks to God, need not wait for the Gleaming, no, need not, my children, need not wait. He is saved as soon as he confesses; the rest is dross, friends, offal. (*Bangs his pipe on the ground to loosen up the cake, for he must fill and fire anew to draw.*) SKINS (*mutters fierce now*)! SKINS OF THE SERPENT. Mark you well, sons of Adam, mark how the skins of the very same serpent did seduce Eve, who ate the forbidden fruit,

thus angering the Lord, who cast her with her husband from the garden, booted them into the mire of sin, from which we must elect to be saved. (*Glares all around to see his weary audience nods, heads fallen on breasts, so fatiguing be work in the fields.*)”

A most piteous exemplum, the snakeskin tale, yet some of those still awake around the fire be digging each other in the ribs, at the missing rib’s very location, for this yellow did perpetuate certain GRIEVOUS ERRORS we yearned to correct, though we dare not gainsay the driver.

Error the First, that First woman be born of First Man. Oh, no, no, no. At our mothers’ breasts we had nourished ourselves on the milk of truth. Every child amongst us knew how First Man and First Woman were born of Damzillah, Whom Her angry father had torn apart. Error the Second, that a serpent, or snake, had come from a crack in the earth to speak to First Woman. Oh, no, no, no, no, no! Indeed, no serpent came, but a tiny small worm, smaller than the meemie worm. Error the Third, that those jitseys are a kin of the serpent of their holy books, for Pierre had read in the accounts of Baron von Salmis, how jitseys came as a plague that afflicted people in those Galub regions with fear & false hope & accidie. And the jitseys came within the memory of a living man, and not at the dawn of time.

Pierre could prove by syllogism, and direct evidence, the jitsey was not the same as (a) the meemie worm or (b) the serpent, and (c) it had not abided in the wilderness—for it had been a wilderness, not a garden—with First Man and First Woman. And these PROOFS be one more EXEMPLUM of the fruitful and important KNOWLEDGES which Pierre had stored in the chests of his conjure house and which he would fain DISPLAY in France, first for savants, then for the wider world of curious, discerning men who would provide him with PENSIONS & PERQUISITES. As he lay in his barrel, his ambitions eddying with smoke in his brain, the

taste of dildun berry sweet on his tongue, his soul once again found repose in his conjure house, where he wandered as Buffon in his garden, composing his CYCLOPEDISH HISTOIRE.

And from this delicious slumber, the splash of the sea on my smoke-cured face awoke me. Alas, the OCEAN had commenced to run in long, swooping swells that tossed my barrel, even as a feather which leaps and dances in steam from a kitchen kettle—a trick we boys had been wont to try on a kitchen wench who peeled onions and grimaced and wept. Whilst her apron covered her eyes, we leapt from the ground where we had been plucking chickens near the bloody block. We dropped handfuls of feathers into the torrent of steam that rose from the kettle's spout, to see them whirl and dance as demons.

"You boys are bewitched," cried the godmother who stirred the pot. In the lowering fog, I saw her.

"You see those stewing legs? Those are the legs of devil boys; buckra butchers them whilst they live."

As the sea washed over my circumferential gunwale, I pulled up my homemade hatch, which had been trailing on its leash in the sea, clacking against my barrel to give the alarm as a clapper outside its bell. Yet I was not snug inside my hold, for the sea still rose. To plug the bunghole, I wadded up the umbilical cord that attached my lid to Mother Barrel, yet though the air in the barrel grow stale.

As the barrel rose on the swellings and sunk into the troughs, it did not stay upright when the wind whipped up the waves, but somersaulted to toss and batter me while my guts scrambled to keep up with its tumbling. Yet I did not curse my barrel. Better be damp than drenched, though I be powerfully crimped and bruised. Alas, now I must piss in my calabash and dribble the piss out the bunghole with my spoon, only to have the sea spit the piss back on me. All the while the barrel were turning and

turning, round and round, slosh and turn, to addle and befuddle me in a heartless, infernal mill, the maw of the insatiable.

Gormilah had swallowed the sea and the sea had swallowed me, as so many others, numbers crossing a page, skeletons crossing the sea with their ankles pierced, boats and barrels of dizzy bondsmen, pickled. Two three a hundred a thousand, myriad kegs, pickled meat of innocent men, barrels of arms and legs and heads and bellies, churning bellies. Pickled! Can't climb out of the barrel. Got to stay in. Stay in your bed, brother. Old Raw-Head be prowling, trailing bloody bones. That one grab you by your tongue and strip your flesh from your bones, will Raw-Head. Then Baron Skull flaunts your crow-picked bones in the mirror of his waistcoat. If he catch you, you wish you had stayed in your bed, had shut your mouth, had done as you were told and never pitied the patch on your mistress's sullen little paps the color of rot.

In a lull, I fumbled for my cowries between my legs, but before I could count half the shells, to determine which mouths spake, the barrel somersaulted, I must grab my lid's leash, to hold it fast, the wadding was pulled from the bung-hole, which I must cover with a hand. And then the shells were dancing and clacking around me, I myself was a shell among others in a gourd, tumbling.

"Oh Spider!" I cried. "Bless me how you can! Speak some last word. Let me hear the voices of those who have cared for me in my life!"

And though the cowries fell around me, and fell again, even as the rain drove down to splash up against the barrel as it tumbled in the roiling waves, I heard—was it the voice of the spider? Or the voice of Jean-François, or Gormilah's voice, or Damzillah's, or Uncle God's, or the voices of the tawny dead, whose food I had eaten, or the voices of the maroons I had shrunk from guiding to

Guinée, who had died of exposure in their open boat, or was it my Vérité's voice hissing REPROACHES in my ear?

*You are defeated through your own fault. A noble soul does not tell lies. The head carries the body. Arguments and tragedy are caused by misunderstanding. No one knows what lies at the bottom of the sea. He who aims at too much gets very little. If you don't know how to live here, you'll learn how to live there. Extend your hand as far as it reaches. No one knows what lies at the bottom of the sea. No one knows what lies at the bottom of the sea. No one knows what lies at the bottom of the sea.*

I closed my eyes and repeated these PROPHETICAL MAXIMS to myself, blabbing as a schoolboy to commit them to memory. And the moving of my lips was a comfort, a consolation, indeed a prayer. And so I repeated this cowny litany to myself, again and again, even when the hissing could no longer be heard, so loud the screaming of the winds around my barrel, & the terrifying roar of thunders, & the hideous crackle of lightening, as if the world were torn apart, whacked in two as a melon under Vérité's hatchet. After an Armageddon blast had wafted a hellish odor through the wadding at my bunghole and under my barrel's tight-pulled lid, I drew the plug but a little back from the bunghole, to ascertain if aught remained of the watery world outside.

Methought I had been blasted to a VOID, an emptiness inhabited only by the peaceful dead whom neither God's care nor His indifference can move. Yet there met my eye, not the dead sitting up on their rafts, chagrined that their sleep had been disturbed, but a SERPENT OR FISH with the crested head of a bird and a spiny mane on its back, the armored coils of which lay across the swell and curl of the water as far as the eye could see. And its eyes were enormous, as if the beast had emerged from a very deep, dark lair where it was at pains to see. The writhing slapping coils did whip the waves to a frenzy of foam as the mouth of the creature opened.

I saw teeth like the rows of glass the whites embedded in their window ledges, but larger, and pointier. And there dangled betwixt two of the teeth what appeared to be a rope. And, further within the creature's opening mouth, a large tortoise, flipped over onto its back with its legs feebly waving, peering dumbly and meekly and helplessly around from its upside-down eyes. And what did the tortoise make of the splintered planks and the keg of nails, breached, with the nails spilling out the top, and, banked up against a further tooth, what appeared to be a man's leathern boot, and with it a plank carved with women blowing horns around the words "Santa Clara"?

And then a sudden darkness, and fetid stillness. Now the rushing and beating of the storm sounded muffled, as if at some distance; then a powerful putrefescent odor, as of week-old fish, mixt with stable-straw that has not been changed for a month; a convulsive shudder; a tumbling movement of the barrel; Pierre was being SWALLOWED.

"Who knows what lies at the bottom of the sea," he cried, clutching handfuls of cowries and kissing them most fervently, stroking the sodden quilt beneath his feet. And the spider's hissing now was the murmur in a child's ear who holds up to it a conch's shell. Pierre heard old Rose chuckling; she was waving her apron at some boys who had snatched feathers from the floor near the butcher's block. They were stroking them across her arms and tickling her legs beneath her chemise; she was laughing as she flapped her apron. Pierre opened his talisman pouch, fumbled for the white feather and pushed the feather out through the bunghole to tickle the serpent's long, long throat, through which the barrel seemed to be shuddering a kind of progress, no doubt toward the belly.

Pierre had seen a snake swallow a mouse—the woeful passage of the lump through the glove-finger body; frantically he wiggled

and woggled his feather. Oh Spider, oh Steward God, oh Gormilah, Damzillah, Jesuson, Fathergod, oh Chenwiyi, Ogun, God Uncle, save me! Spiggle wiggle tiggie smiggle. Pierre jiggled his feather and jiggled some more. His barrel continued a shuddering progress toward the certain doom of digestion. Jiggle jiggle nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing . . . then, of a sudden, of an infinitesimal, tiny sudden, a shift, a jerk, a rumbling gurgling, a barking, a cough or a hiccough. The feather was sucked out the bunghole; Pierre's hand was empty; he cried out. Blessed holy miracle, his barrel was now moving in the opposite direction to digestion's progress, and rapidly, and was soon ejected from the creature's mouth with a shudder, followed by a bouncing plash. And a little spot of sunlight came through his bunghole and quivered on his wrecked stocking, as if to say, "The world be intact. Ergo, you live." And a wondrous fresh smell permeated the barrel. And Pierre was emboldened to crack the lid, and so was privileged to see the creature's scaly back arching and diving, as a heaven-spanning rainbow, descending to the lower depths, yet barely ruffling the now-calm waters. A few bubbles came up, but the creature did not return. It had vanished with his mother Marie Mandilé-Ba's feather in its belly, which loss, though of talisman, Pierre regretted but slightly. He heaved a sigh of relief. For he had been SAVED from a WATERY DOOM in the stinking belly of a monstrous fish.

He wept, and thanked his mother, his feather, his shells and his spider, and recalled a story Rose had told.

ONCE LONG AGO lived a clever, fortunate boy and girl, very merry and lithe, but with fussing, worrisome parents. These saucy children ran away from home to see the world and to do as they pleased, laughing at their own boldness. They went to live far from their parents in a cave with two doors, one small enough for

birds to fly in, which the slender children could crawl through, the other tall enough and wide enough for the huge bully who, unbeknownst to the children, had been following them, sidling from shadow to tree, watching.

The bully saw how the boy went out hunting, having told his sister to stay in the cave, with both the doors barred. When the boy returned with a goatsucker bird he had shot, he sang a little song so the girl would know he had come:

Sister, Open, Sister, Open  
 The one small door.  
 Oh what a fine-marbled godwit flies in.  
 Oh what a lip-smacking treat.

And the girl licked her lips, for her brother had forbidden her to roast while he was out, lest the smell draw those hungry ones who skulk everywhere and will not hesitate to eat anyone. But the sister was a pert girl, and willful. One day while the boy was out with his sling, she made a very small fire of twigs and leaves in the cave, and she roasted a breast of spice finch left over from the day before. And then a heavy thick breathing shook the cave; the bully was at the big door, snuffling around its edges.

When the girl would not open to his knocking, the bully drew back a little, for he was sly. He sang a song very like her brother's song, but, unfortunately for him, in a growly, rumbling voice:

Sister, Open, Sister, Open  
 The one big door.  
 Let me in with my bag so huge  
 With meat of the black-throat priest-wit I've killed.  
 Oh what a lip-smacking treat!

The girl was hungry, yet she was not fooled. She sat in the corner and sucked on the bones of yesterday's finch. Oh, but her sucking sound brought the juice up into the bully's mouth. And

## VOYAGE OF AN APPRENTICE SAVANT

he drooled and licked his lips and stroked his enormous belly.  
And his hunger made him even more cunning than before.

Now he sang again, in a high, sweet voice:

Sister, Open, Sister, Open

The one big door.

Let me in with my bag so full:

A flock of gull-billed terns I've killed.

Oh what a lip-smacking treat!

Now the foolish girl unbarred the door. In one gulp he ate her  
and her finch breast, then he hid behind a stone, waiting for the  
brother.

The boy had killed no bird that day but had found a honey  
tree. "Wing to wing," he said to himself. "All that is sweet is not  
flesh." And he stole the comb after stunning the bees with smoke  
from a fire he had made by rubbing together sticks. And so bees  
slumbered in their comb in the bag on the boy's back as he  
skipped home to the cave, humming to himself, looking forward  
to the sweet treat he and his sister would enjoy. And the bees woke  
up and hummed with him. And soon enough he came to the cave,  
where he sang:

Open, Sister, Open, Sister!

Open now the big door—

Let me enter with my bag so huge.

I bear greater sweetness than mango-birds' flesh.

Oh, what a lip-smacking treat!

And the bully reached out with one big toe and unbarred the  
door, and the boy walked in and snicker-snap!

Inside the bully's dark belly, the boy embraced his sister, then  
he opened his sack. "Wing to wing," he murmured. The bees flew  
out. Wide awake now, they stung and stung the bully from within.  
The bully rolled on the floor, clutching his belly. Hiding behind

the bully's rocklike heart, the boy squeezed his sister's shoulder, and she squeezed his back. The two children crawled on their hands and knees up the bully's throat, just ahead of a wave of muck the bully was vomiting. And the bees flew before the children, after them, and all around them, but did not sting them.

The bully did not stop hurting even when the bees had flown from his mouth. He ran from the cave until he came to a wallow where cows rolled. He swallowed cooling mud and rolled and rolled, but the bees followed him, stinging from the outside now. He could not shake them off, for whichever part of his hide was up as he rolled, that part did they sting. So many stings did he receive that he fell on his back and died like an animal, with his arms and legs sticking straight up in the air. And his teeth, which he had been gnashing and gritting, opened. He belched, an awful stinking belch. Then he farted, an awful stinking fart. And then the bees flew back inside him through both doors, for now he was quiet and clean. And they made their home in his belly. And when he had dwindled to a skeleton, naught but bones, anyone could reach in to get all the honey he wanted. And so the boy and the girl lived quite content, with sweets every day of their lives.

And the sweets they ate improved their temper, said old Rose. They were not as stubborn or as willful as before. They brought their parents to the cave with the two doors, and they all lived together, in harmony and joy, until it was time for the children to go to their mother's brother, as children did then in that place. But that was another story, and it did not end completely well.

Long ago IN ROSE'S LAP Pierre had popped his thumb in his mouth and had wept, for he could not return to his mother, Marie Mandilé-Ba, who had been sold, he knew not where, nor was there reason to suppose he would ever find his father, Jolicoeur, called Juba, who was dead or gone and came no longer to see him. And during all the time that Rose was telling the story, Pierre did not

once look up at her face or look into the fire or look out at those others crouching into the warmth and light, but only cradled his head between the old nurse's two soft paps and nestled into her big soft belly and listened, contented, as a satiated spider in the middle of a web.

The sea became very calm when the serpent had spit out Pierre and dived back down to the bottom whence it must have come. The barrel had come to a shivering halt, with the water lapping gently against its sides. Night was falling once again. Far away the carnival of the dead lit up the sky; on the waters they danced in mirrored clothes while Pierre rested in the bosom of the Sea-One, nursing his hunger and thirst like two little babes. He was alive! He prayed he was not becalmed beneath the gaud-fest of stars in the doldrums, yet, though he was thirsty, he slept contented, as one who has returned from death. Soon enough, as he rocked between waking and sleep, there wafted into his nostrils a fresh, rich, green exuberant fragrance. And before he had moved from the dreamless doldrum he had floated into, yes, before he had opened his eyes, a fearsome jolt shook his barrel, and it crunched on LAND.

## PART THE SEVENTH

### *The Motherhood of Man*



Yet I did not leap forth, but crouched still, Homunculus Soul in my skull of wood, ears pricked to the slapping, murmuring waves. I braced myself to the cask's shift, assaying the grunt of sand beneath, delirious, desiccated, sitting still as a man whose leg irons chafe at his smallest move, my mind rubbed sore by the press of PARADOX. Surely it were meet to rejoice, for I were REDEEMED FROM SLAVERY, SERPENT AND SEA. Yet how numbly I mourned my likely loss, the loss of all I had known: children running through the dusty yard, the women's voices floating after them, the smell of yam and manioc porridge bubbling in the pots. And after supper, before sweet sleep, the stories of wives who changed to doves to please their husbands, and husbands who changed to snakes to spy on their wives, of naughty children changed to grain and eaten by their parents' hens and jealous gods who stole the rich men's cows.

Grounded in the sand of an unknown shore, I feared I would not hear again the firelight testaments, and feared I would; not to hear I was derelict in freedom, to hear, returned to M'sieu. Oh, I did not want to be caught, to be spitefully rented to cruel, harsh

slave-breakers, to drudge in their carries, grinding bones and tearing muscles, hoeing and cutting, hoeing and cutting, dreaming of the book-filled room where I had read the words of savants. I feared the suspended whippings—the ladder, the hammock, the Four-Post. I feared I would be sold to a poor planter who could neither clothe nor feed me. When Baron Skull came for my corpse, he would find but broken bones in a bag of scars, all that made me a man having long since died within and been eaten by rage and grief. Oh better a barren solitude, relieved by what comfort I could contrive!

Yet still I saw before me Vérité, her cheek to the rim of the rain barrel, blowing an ashy cork across the water to her hand, spelling me to safety, as she had promised. Courage, Vérité! You will not yet see my features written on the surface of the water! It is not yet my time. I have been redeemed from the sea and now my hopes reside in land!

But what land? Despite my dilemma, I was curious. I shook off my fear to spy out the bunghole; my eye told me I had washed ashore on an island resembling Saint-Michel, even to the proliferation of orchids. This coincidence did not encourage me, yet though the isle appeared little if any inhabited. And so I stayed in my barrel while thirst increased; the sky darkened a second time before I screwed up courage to explore. Then I peered out one last time, to ascertain my safety in emerging.

Through the bunghole my eye met a round yellow one with a black center—the eye, methought, of a FRIGHTFUL LARGE FISH, the terrible serpent risen from the deep to claim me!

In thoughtless panic, I popped the cover of the cask and saw in the dusk no greedy monster come to sup on my flesh, but a homelier haunt—the first old rat-counting madame, wrapped in rosaries, clouded crystal marbles and boys' round eyes, necklaces of rats strung tail to mouth, squeaking vengeance. Her undressed hair did appear to billow about a sea-wrinkled face, illumined

from within by pale phosphorescence that shone with a fey green light. Her feet had been changed to frogs' feet! Oh, what restlessness had floated her out of her grave to loom before me, petulant and terrible?

"Mistress!" I cried. "I have only arrived and have not yet had time to kill any rats. I am too old for marbles. I wear drawers now; nay, I have been raised from drawers to breeches."

Her mouth opened and closed; she fixed my eye with her fishy stare.

"Pierre did not manufacture the effigy that foretold your fate, nor stuff it with rats, nor set it on fire. I pray you, show mercy!"

I threw myself at her froggy feet to plead for my life. She squeaked in an odd inhuman voice and hopped back on those amphibolous feet, her wary eyes inscrutable. She had no nose! How could she live and have her being? I gaped at her as she gaped at me.

After we had eyed each other some wary time, she turned on her flippered feet and dove beneath the waves. I ran behind some brush, and nestled into my haunches, and watched a while, but soon I took heart from the wave-slapped silence. For, if she were old Madame, changed by the sea, or if she were not, what boot it? She had not summoned boatloads of men with muskets and whips to break me body and soul to their will. I had best put aside my terror and see to my immediate circumstances, for my throat was painfully woody, my tongue swollen monstrous in my mouth.

Soon enough I had drunk my fill at sweetwater pools among rocks 'pon which I was lucky not to have foundered. I cautiously circumambulated my island, peering about me 'til I knew its parts, and knew them uninhabited save by palm rats, run-go to-fro mice, the lady-puff lizards and flocks of red butterfly birds. I tore off the bottom of my shirt, and tied it on a stick, and planted this banner

so as to CLAIM THE PLACE for my own. The amphibolous-footed lady I had pegged for a hapless shade, a phantasm with no body, a refugee from Skull. So I banished my terror, devoting myself to comfortable, necessary tasks, viz., I constructed a hut of stones chinked with sea-weed—which the wood lice abhorred, mayhap on account of the salt—an abode larger and roomier than my plantation kennel, with a roof of reeds and a porch that furnished a view of the setting sun.

I had discovered betimes an erratic freshet, moreover, varieties of juicy fruit to suck, viz., guava, and sweet and sour sops, and mambins and mombees, and dildun berries. My dwelling erected, I dug and gingerly tasted of roots; I nibbled the spiny pear or artichoke fruit called *cactus*; I washed my sodden quilt in the sea and hung it to dry, whereupon I settled in to battle insects, like any land-holder. If I had been able to send my linen out, and get in some books, I might have accounted myself in paradise, though I did want company.

Where was my spider? And where the boats of men I had floated past on the sea? Mayhap, in my circumambulations of the isle, I had missed them. I called down the crevices of rocks and up into trees: "Holloa! Pierre comes as friend. You need not fear him. He is hale; moreover he is possessed of many useful, ingenious skills."

Silence but for the slapping waves, the rippling crickus of the butterfly birds and the buzzing racket of insects.

"I am writing a compendious histoire," I cried, "in which are chronicled the habits and attributes of beasts and the customs and events of men who are scanted in Euclid accounts."

If anyone were bidding his time to speak, he kept his counsel. If I wanted conversation, I must PRATTLE TO MYSELF, bidding myself good morrow and good evening, asking and answering questions.

"Where am I?" I did ask me.

## THE MOTHERHOOD OF MAN

"An island very like Saint-Michel," me did respond. "At a meridian on a parallel I could not ascertain."

"And climate and vegetation?"

"Familiar . . . familiar."

"And does this place have a name?"

"Not one known to me, but it is mine to name by shirt tail's claim."

"So you must ponder the question of suitable names, their provenance and power."

All the places I knew had the names of white men, and were under the dominion of white men's Gods, viz., Saint Michel. Now that Saint with His sword were a brave Christian martyr, His likeness a powerful charm to protect who would implore Him to intercede with Son and Father to bless the inhabitants of His name-place. So I had been told by Père Gouy, and could believe, for these celestial hierarchies were very like mundane etiquettes I had known, wherein a slave-man must entreat the driver or the overseer, to gain from his master some favor, viz., extra salt or cloth or a holiday. Yet on my new island, no hierarchy, indeed, no society at all. It made no sense, then, to NAME THIS PLACE for a celestial go-between. Indeed why name it for any God of the whites?

The whey-guts had not found my present island, or if they had, they had deemed it too trifling in size, or too far removed from other settlement, or too rocky for large-scale planting. If they had o'erlooked this isle, then no doubt their Gods had.

Might I not give the place some name from Guinée, to honor the Gods Who walked on invisible legs? One of those Great Ones might protect me! Yet I was the only African domiciled in this, my freehold. I had explored it over and over again and found no bandit maroons, nor any other derelicts or fugitives. Were the Gods of Africk more needfully employed where more Africkans sojourned? Could these Gods see PIERRE, so alone and far away

from his kind? Though I knew the name of my mother's people, I did not know the name of my father's, nor any of my ancestors' lineages, so how could I prove my dignity and worth to the Gods Who watch the Fombé? Though yet I hoped my name would claim me from my pouch, the bag had been silent lo! these years.

Did I await the Black Redeemer, taller than any tree, walking across the sea from Guinée? Had He already saved me? Did He make my acquaintance closer, would He cast me out of His presence, who had tucked a napkin into my collar and read the books of savants and set myself above others, even in creating my 'cyclopedia from accounts and relations of my fellows? Dare I approach Him?

"Spider," I called. "Dear and only friend of my voyage, where, oh where, have you gone?"

Ah me! Without my spider to speak for my cowries, I must fall back on what good sense an erstwhile napkin-tucker possessed, without his wife on hand.

Yet where was good sense in the tight circle of dancing Speculation? My thoughts whirled as my wife had whirled when the Uncle rode her, dancing in a circle drawn in dust, her useless leg nailed to the spot where Uncle had clapped her between His thunder arms, filling her with light.

Yet my wife were not here, my spider not here, indeed very little were here in this wilderness place. If a God be resident in my newfound home, He must live as a God of men with nothing, a God of bare-scratched gardens Who follows the seasons' food, without the faith of persons settled in numbers to sustain Him. He must live on the transpiration of tiny, humble creatures, viz., jutias and mango hummers, or even vegetables, that gently raise and lower their leaves, creating a wind that is a humble breath, like the ah! of faith.

Had not Uncle already reached from the tawny past, to speak in the tongues of red men to Africans miserably captive, who

could offer Him little but the steam of fish and yams aboil? Had not Uncle guided with my wife my own escape? There were no tawnies on my isle, yet perhaps they came here to hunt or pray. I whittled a driftwood peg and drove it into the ground, its upper end wedged in a split palm-frond to form a tall, leafy triangle. I resolved to name for Uncle the island of my freedom. And I wrote *Isle de l'Oncle* in the sand, and spelled out in pebbles by the door of my house, *Pierre Baptiste de l'Isle de l'Oncle*, and asked myself, did I know now, where I was?

Here, Kind Reader, I beg you consider the LONELY DISCOMFURE of a derelict, who has hitherto marked the vicissitudes of his existence but in relation to others. Thus he has made the map by which he knows himself. The peril I had escaped notwithstanding, I longed for company. I longed to taste once again the manioc stew of my godmothers. I longed to hear the people throwing stories back and forth round the fires. I did even long for the company of the master, Dufay, for though he had sold my mother, yet we shared the passion for learning. Still I fancied I heard his footfall, a damp entrance from the dew with sketch in hand, "My Goody, I have finally got that blue parrot, which is like no other we have seen. Now do you write Buffon for me to sign, and Dr. Hamel in Saint-Hildebert, and inquire if another has seen the bird and drawn it."

Yet more than any other of my connections I missed my wife, the spicy scent of whose melon-ripe person rolled with mine I could but faintly sniff in the quilt I had brought in the bottom of my barrel. In truth, the whiff of home so sickened me with yearning, I flung the quilt from me, preferring to shiver in the evening damp. I sometimes dreamed of jumping back into my barrel and trying to row it home, where they would be so glad to see me I might escape punishment. Idle fancies! I had no idea which way was home.

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I feared I would live out my days in isolation more complete than First Man's. No one like me was with me. First Man enjoyed the company of sister and wife, his own First Woman, born with him of Damzillah, Water-She-Silver-She, who had lain with Her son, Chenwiyi, in the mud. Didn't Uncle cut off Her head with a swing of His hammer, while Chenwiyi was still inside Her? Didn't Uncle stomp on Her body, smashing Her ribs with His horny feet, forgetting that Chenwiyi squatted between the roots of the en-na-na tree, diving to catch the ribs that Uncle was throwing away? Didn't Chenwiyi bury half those broken ribs in earth, so they would grow into Gormilah and Gormilah and Gormilah, Who sprouted all the other Gods, each separate, each born from Gormilah, hairy, monstrous, many-hearted, Gormilah? Then the Uncle threw Chenwiyi down into waters that surround the world, down into Chaos, and He was lost. So were they all to me, or I to them, far, far away. Lost the Gods immortal, brothers and sisters, all far, far away. But for birds & ghosts & insects, I was alone. Oh, the *insectae*!

Fanning myself with a palmetto frond one afternoon, I contemplated my banishment amidst the contumely of buzzing and whining. Quite idly I drew open my pouch, to see what comfort its tea-label commonplaces might afford; though I sought a soothing proverb of my godmothers, my groping fingers fastened 'pon an epigram of Pintal: "At the heart of solitude is sorrow, at the heart of sorrow, bliss, to know thyself."

Then my hands on the tea label trembled. I spoke angrily to the philosopher who had dared to utter the sentiments I had formerly thought pretty enough to copy.

"What cosseted individual," cried Pierre, "living peaceful in a social state, isolated but momentarily in a book-filled room, can deign to preach to one whose singularity is so bleak and all-encompassing?"

And a ghostly Pintal did speak in my ear, saying, "There is no choice but to embrace one's fate, and in so doing, transcend."

Spider? Be you there? And speaking as Pintal?

Pierre Baptiste: "If you are to preach so brazen a homily, filled with wisdom yet without sympathy, then I dissolve you back into air, you and all other savants so insensible of my condition."

As I said these words there stole into my breast and limbs a power not my own. I am but Man, and can but as A HEAVENLY SIGN account for the fire that sprang up in my hand to consume the tea label, charring it to ash, yet without burning my hand. Amazed, I sprinkled these ashes back into the pouch from which the label had come, though not without first attempting to catch and save the elusive fire, that I might use it to ward off the mosquitoes and merry-men that plagued me. Yet the fire extinguished itself quickly.

Looking up from its ashes in the palm of my hand, my eye fastened once again upon the words "Pierre Baptiste de l'Isle de l'Oncle" I had spelled out in pebbles by my door. And looking further around I saw that all the geographical features of the place did now spell out *l'Isle de l'Oncle* and *Pierre Baptiste de l'Isle de l'Oncle*. Yea, the very leaves of trees and ground plants, the twigs and motes of debris that littered the island floor, the flock of parrots whose flight darkened the sky, all spelled out these words in changing and shifting patterns, a whirling and shifting dance that lifted me out of myself. I raised my arms above my head and shouted "Uncle!" "Uncle!" The floor of the world rocked beneath me.

Though the island were but wind-bent growth, sand and rock, lizard and bird, with no prominent features that might send my voice back as an echo, yet did my call softly reverberate, as if every leaf did catch and magnify His Name, every mote cry "Uncle!" "Uncle!"

Then I found my feet moving, my body swaying. Yet who chanted, who drummed? My bare feet marked the time with a resonant slap, but a greater heart than mine beat "Uncle! Uncle!" in my breast. I and I turned and swayed in a pattern I did not know I knew, twisting my and my body to shape the letters of an airy alphabet, and in that alphabet, to spell *Uncle God*. Then the world hissed and turned blue, as if swallowed by the sea: I and I picked up the pebbles with which I had not long previous formed in mortal language the words "Pierre Baptiste de l'Isle de l'Oncle"; I placed them in my and my mouth, and the sea spit back the world. I and I made a broom of silver-thatch, and swept-wrote His name in the letters of enigma in the garden of sand, and knew then and then my place.

Yet even as a Chosen of Uncle my ERSTWHILE AMBITIONS claimed me. I lay on my back in the porch of my house, regarding the sky through a crack that had opened in the thatch. And the clouds rolled upward as a glory in the frontispiece of a tragedy. And clothed but in draperies, with laurel circling his brow, Pierre ascended to a world of ink, constructed all of word and line, the shadow erased. Pierre sat on a chair, of which the left leg were a Doric column, the right an Ionic. Between his legs in both his hands Pierre held the staff of Aesculapius, snakes curling around it, the wings of Mercury fluttering and live at its top. As to Pierre's deportment, every gesture were revelatory, frontal, and symmetric with some other gesture. If he raised his right hand, then the left foot must twitch. So he was arranged for himself as a spectacle for a single omnipotent observer. He listened with the indifference of one all-powerful upon overhearing a learned dispute among a number of men in very bright wigs, some kneeling or standing to his right, some to his left. They shook their heads, and the powder of their wigs dispersed as dust motes in the light. A steaming

volcano of ink rose behind Pierre, coughing but not coughing, as he coughed without coughing, as if he had been created only to listen in stifled silence to voices of those who speak. He was King, yet specimen in cage of light.

"To asseverate that the ordinary world around us, viz., God's Creation, of the Great Year 4666 before Our Lord, were other than perfect, were blasphemy," argued a gentleman in a full-bottom. M'sieu in his father's wig? "Though I cannot deny that men and beasts and vegetables and perhaps the winds and water do suffer from uneven distribution of benefits on Earth, mayhap in HEAVEN."

"Still the presumption must be honored," cried another, "our divine Creator were as skilled, at least, as a watchmaker; the Creator did know what parts were needed for the working of the whole. This, were He verily of loathsome character!"

Yet another, haughtier eminence asserted that "perfection is dependent on the onlooker's perspective; moreover, perfection itself has its lights and shades. It is not always revealed in the world with clarity. It has not always the *apparency* it possesses in M'sieu's paintings, or in the chopping, static categories of too-rigorous taxonomy."

And who were this punctilious worthy wagging his finger at M'sieu? Could he have been—? The great Buffon? Had Pierre arrived in Montbard a homunculus trapped in a drawing that exists but for engraving, to be contemplated as a copy of itself? Was Pierre trapped in this perpetual noon among pedant-savants who dispute and dispute? Oh marooned! Marooned in pendulum perpetuity, ticking inside a clock of crystal through which light is bent into colors arrayed in a hierarchic band—a band, a bond, a band for a bondsman, abandoned. Yet not abandoned, for here he were, as he had hoped and wished and feared, PIERRE NOVELLANIS, who creates himself. Who or what created Pierre to create

the conception, Pierre could not have said, and cannot now. For even as M'sieu, to take a known *exemplum*, were temperamental, eccentric, and absent-minded, despite the clarity and purity of his rendering, so the nature of the Supreme Artist be unfathomable in paradox beyond "Omnipotent," "Eternal," "Omnipresent," and other grandiloquent honorifics. Indeed the Supreme Artist may be One who has no glass to see His world, even as His world has no glass to see Him.

Yet this is a cold conception. A man who suffers cannot afford it. Pierre would live in a universe he could charm, yea, influence, to act on his behalf. "My behalf! My behalf!" Pierre in his Doric-Ionic chair smote the ground with the staff of Aesculapius. He heard then a faint, astonished, dismayed cry, and the tearing of paper. A volcano erupted. Hot ink flowed around, and all the learned men were burned as the clouds melted. The sun was extinguished. The world darkened, and Pierre was submerged in oblivious sleep, though still the brightness of noon were hot on his lids.

I opened my eyes on my volcanoless isle to find I had slept through a night into day. I remained in the imperfect world, my rock-bound sea-girt shirt-tail kingdom stinking with orchids. The noon of perfect light? The noon of awful heat! I thought to dip my sleeve in a puddle to cool my temples, but I felt parched from within, as if the shadow that spilled on the ground behind my heels had been my spirit flowing out of me, leaving me with a thirst like a hungry tide, pulling me out of myself. And I called not Uncle, but the name of Pélérine, who served Uncle. And I lay with the sun burning my eyes, wailing without tears, clutching the ragged quilt she had given me.

"Woe!" I moaned, hugging the quilt. "Woe again! And Woe, and Woe, and Woe!" At last, the sun began dropping in the sky;

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my shadow returned and opened around me like a mother's lap. Rain fell into my mouth, the sky's tears. Though I would learn my place anew, I would never be content alone.

"Oh Uncle, if you love me, barrel my WIFE and deliver her into my hands like a hog's-head of bacon; let her cradle in her arms a pile of books from M'sieu's shelves, it scarcely matters which. If you cannot bring Pélérine, then deliver me, at least, from the endless hum of merrywings, the louder buzz of mosquitoes. For these noises do rouse me to a frenzy of distraction. My body is covered with pea-sized knobs that itch. I need my wife to daub them with vinegar. I need her help to devise a bed. For any hammock I string of vines to raise me above the jaws of ants, they devour the very next day! Let her come with tar to smear on the cords!

"If I cannot have my wife, then let me have fire to make smoke; let me have a burning mirror, like Buffon's, yea, let me have a tinder box; for how can I make fire without one? Yet fire you brought, Uncle, to burn my label. Bring it again, in a captive manner, a blaze to drive off winged furies. And pity, I pray, my poor feet, for chiggers have burrowed under my toenails and ulcerated all the tender parts. My knife is rusting; when it is dull, how will I dig the chiggers out? How will I cut reeds for thatch when my roof is devoured by wood lice? Yea, I cannot even do women's work!"

Only the drones of insects answered my ravings.

"A hoe!" I called as an afterthought. "If not my wife, or a fire, or a whetstone, give me a hoe to clear some ground, to mound up cones of earth around the roots of plantings."

Now I missed the master's estate because the land was cultivated! Oh, such is the lot of the derelict civic in his expectations!

Two dainty pickamon lizards, their tongues darting rapidly, precise and fussy in their movements as well-trained gentlemen

soldiers, did bring with them from nowhere a cooling breeze. I fanned myself in it, and thanked Uncle, for surely He had brought the breeze. I would yet achieve my destiny through His intervention, HIS KIND BROWN HAND tearing through the paper world to snatch me up and set me down among savants. To bind my ambitions in Uncle's web I wrapped the tea-label sayings of philosophes with those of my godmothers, pairing them in threads unraveled from my ragged shirt, till the paper weddings were invisible inside the cocoons. I put the cocoons in my pouch with that other paper wrapped in thread, the secret bound to Who-Knew-What-God my mother had given me to protect.

And half of each meal I ate I gave to Uncle, arranging it carefully on leaves before His name in stones at my door. And always when I killed a nacarette or a bongon bird, the blood and feathers I gave to Uncle, smeared on His stones, mixed with what had been in the bird's gut and with some of the flesh, which I must eat raw, for I had no fire. And half the salt I dried was His, and half the water I collected His. And around the trunk of each tree on the isle I tied a cord braided of silver-thatch. I renewed each day my vow never to cut the trees, though I might take a few leaves or a frond at a time, for the bodies of the living trees were Uncle's body, His sanctuary.

Yet Pierre was not the fool to suppose the God Uncle worked in the world unaided. No, Pierre must assist. If he wished to be reunited with his wife, and commence his apprentice savantship, he must HELP HIMSELF. And so Pierre, who had saved his barrel outside his house, to collect the rain, planned a SECOND OCEANIC JOURNEY, this one prepared as an expedition, with provisions & gear & wherewithal to navigate.

Pierre could have no charts, but, as ancient mariners, would ascertain his mundane position from the fixed constellations, in relation to the horizon. He could establish the time of year from the sun's position at its zenith. So, if he but studied the heavens and

noted the positions of stars on days recorded in the calendar he had made of notched driftwood, he might navigate.

Yet unfortunately, though its joints had swollen at sea, the outside of his barrel was cracking in the hot sun, while the inside rotted, from the rainwater it held. And that barrel had never been easy to steer, for she lacked any semblance of rudder or tiller. Moreover, she moved entirely with and upon the tide, having no sail to catch the wind. She was all hold and no deck, no prow, no keel, though she could be weighted, as on his previous journey, with his tools, and for a second journey he could add in stones to keep her from skidding adrift on the wave.

Yet ballast would not suffice to hold direction. He must dismantle his barrel to build a BETTER VESSEL, that he could steer; or he would never reach the realm of savants, where he could publish his *histoire* and show his people worthy of liberty. He could not pass for cargo in the open boat he proposed to build, yet he must give up safety in hiding for a truer boat, one which could hold his wife, if he could contrive to purloin her. He would saw his barrel into halves, two pods. Pierre and his wife would each be a pea in one pod. When he had the boat, he would find a way to snatch her.

He began to devote a part of each day to hacking through his keg with his rusted saw, halving her through her crosswise circumference at her most swollen middle, preserving intact the hoops that held her staves together. Though the work were arduous, it yielded in time two sound pods, which he joined circumference to circumference with ropes of twisted & braided fiber of the silver-thatch. Yet, even in the calmest of waters, the lashing gave way. Moreover, striding a swell, the down pod shipped water. So Pierre plotted to elevate the two pods on a driftwood raft, which he might have constructed of sawn-up trees, had not Uncle forbidden him to cut trees. More than once Pierre stood at the base of a well-grown tree, rusty ax in hand, only to hear the voice of Uncle

rumbling a thunderous reproof. He had not the heart to swing the ax. So, alas, he must wait for driftwood, wait and wait.

Yet he continued to make improvements in his craft. He tied his oar aft of his aft pod, and thus ruddered the whole. He devised a balance frame, of drift sticks lashed with vine, that floated on hollow coco shells, plugged up and tied at intervals along the frame, to buoy his still-clumsy vessel and prevent her o'erturning. And now he was ready for a sail, and on this point he stuck again.

Yet it came to him he might weave mats of silver thatch, which, if woven very fine and tight, might catch and hold wind. He commenced to try proofs of his hypothesis, weaving first small patches of the stuff, then larger, which he lashed to his arms, and held to the wind, to see if he rose above the ground, a human kite. When he rose a little off his heels, he tried larger squares and found he rose as high above himself as a bird above a tree, though his heart be left on the ground and his body plash in the sea like the carcass of Icarus. Yet now he had reason to believe his stuff might hold, he commenced to weave still larger squares, and added for strength a diagonal crossing of his warp and weft, and then a cross-diagonal. This most tedious and intricate business his fingers came to effect on their own, while the thread of his musing wove itself an intricate, seditious plot whereby he would take a tree or two yet fool the Uncle into supposing His timber intact. Mayhap a lumber raft were too greedy a conception, for it would take all the trees. Mayhap a smaller conception, for which one small tree would suffice, a tree so small Uncle would feel the loss no more than Pierre the burrowing of a chigger. Yet of this one tree, Pierre could make a prow and a taffrail and an armature to stabilize his boat in its balance frame. Still too greedy a conception? Pierre would settle for a prow, made of a tree so small the Uncle would feel its loss no more than Pierre the bite of a merrywing. Too greedy still? Pierre passed his shuttle of a hand through his warp threads, filling, filling, filling. So occupied was

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he weaving sails and plots, he did not trouble to eat for a day and a night. But now a hunger gnawed at his belly like a rat chewing its way from an effigy into which some boys have sewed it.

Methought I would quiet my belly with turtle meat. So, after paring a spear from a drifted branch, I took me to the rock outcropping at the westward side of my domain where turtles fed. Were I to frequent these unsheltered rocks by day, the sun made me dizzy. I had fallen into the custom of standing upon them by night, to hear the boom of the surf pound in time with my heart, when my longings overwhelmed me as they did if I stayed on my pallet of thatch, pining for my wife in the dark.

Imagine my chagrin, this mild adventitious evening, to perceive wriggling on my spear point THE SEA SHADE that I had mistaken, first for a serpent, then for First Madame! I had speared it just beneath the shoulder blade, where the “arm”—that long fin with fingers—joined the body. If it had been Madame I might have relished the vengeance of puncture. Yet, though blood gushed from a hole in pink-specked skin, gill slits heaved most piteously—gills! The specter was corporeal, but she was a fish!

I lay the head in the water, so she could respire, and stanchd with the rags of my shirt the flow of her blood. Still she lay in a swoon. When the sun came up, I saw she would be burned if I did not arch over her a roof of fronds and sticks, cadged from the debris at the tideline. This I did, and she lay calmly, her gills palpitating in the brine, her eyes gaping.

As the tide went out, I saw that she would no longer be able to respire, so I moved her body, lifting it in my arms to follow the receding waters. At first she struggled in my embrace, but after I had lifted her several times, she lay still, her shanky legs draped over my arm and her head with its coarse-crimped curls lolling on my breast. Only once did she bare her teeth, and then for the first time I saw the double row of needles. I took from my talisman

pouch my mother's bone hook, which I fastened to a line I had braided with threads from my shirt. I caught with this tackle the smallest, tenderest fishlings that flashed and turned in tide pools. I offered them to her, flopping still, in a seawater gravy contained in a clam's shell, pushing said shell between her jaws lest she sink her teeth into my hand. But, seeing she took the fish very dainty from the shell, I vouchsafed to feed her with my fingers, and found she nibbled nicely. So we got on well, and her wound mended.

I wondered I had ever confounded her with Rat-Ma'am, even granting the proposition that First Old Mistress be a species other than human; even so, this creature I now entertained were more foreign a species still, even as a snake is less penetrable in nature than a dog or a goat. I do not know why I thought of her as "She." She bore no mark of the female sex, unless one count her long tarnished locks—not in truth hair, but some bony substance like coral—and elegant, long-fingered hands, that called to mind the filigree of lace.

In time, I got to know her ways, a fillip of her feet, fast, as a cat will fillip its tail when plagued by a nuisance; or a gaze following my hands when I had a fish. I came to know many a place on her scaly skin, most particularly on her forehead, she did shiver to have touched, moving closer to my hand.

Upbraiding myself the while for foolishness, I commenced to call her "*ma bonne amie*" and finally "*Amie*." I directed all my prattle to her and wept tears of joy and distress when, her wound having healed, she dove beneath the billows, returning only for brief nocturnal visits, to be petted on the forehead, provided the shadow of spear or hook fall not across her path.

In this independence as in her former helplessness she gawked at me as if mesmerized by my babble, but it were the talisman, hanging from my neck, she did eye in its swinging. This I

discovered when she snatched it and dragged it beneath the sea, consigning it to the oblivious depths with all its charms save the fish hook, which I had accustomed myself to daily use, and so had hung with its looped line from a stick poked into a chink in a wall of my house.

She surfaced without the bag the next time she came to be cosseted; though I did scold her and wag my finger, she would not bring the talisman back. Perhaps she had snatched it to repay the wound I had inflicted, but justice at my expense were small comfort. I had clung to the talisman as an orchid with its phallical roots clutching air. Yet I kept more than my fishing hook. For I stored in my cranial conjure house my 'cyclopedic histoire of mystical, natural & diverse knowings; I had fashioned a rustic domesticity in my physical abode; my boat was abuilding. Bereft of my cherished talisman, I did not wither or fade, but continued to weave my sails and plot my future course, which now I could do without thought of food.

Though AMIE did not breathe through a nose, she compensated the theft of the talisman and indeed made good the debt of her life according to her custom, repaying my solicitude with fish, which she chewed into mush and regurgitated at my feet. Thus, I could leave my mother's hook hanging in my house as a charm and did not have to risk it atrawl. Nor did I need to use my spear. I would have preferred that the fish be brought me whole, yet she could not fathom my revulsion: at last I bade her vomit the stew into the calabash I had of my wife, and drank while holding my nose. I found the stew most sweet and mild, like a medley of fish and yam.

Without my rain barrel I must search for shallow pools of sweet water in the rocks, and risk desiccation if there be drought, yet I made some assurance of supply, by hammering at a number of very large boulders, till I found one that would flake if I beat it. So by my labors I made a cistern, and in time made others, and my

days fell into a pleasing pattern. I wove my sails, and Amie brought my dinner, and I gazed at the sky reflected in my cisterns and saw my Vérité, reflected in the barrel of rain in Dufay's yard. Through the open door of the kitchen, I saw she, too, built boats, though hers were of sugar. With a long-handled spoon of charred wood she spun crystal threads from a pot, and with those threads rigged ships that would sail, not on water, but on light that shimmers atop the waves, joining sea to land and air. I prayed we might finish our vessels at the same time; we might meet in the middle of the sea.

One evening Amie spewed into the calabash a strange seashell, a SMALL ROSY CONE which crumbled upon my inspection. Thereupon she emitted a yawp, the first noise I had heard of her, and slapped her feet on the water. She brought no more food for several evenings.

When she returned I was hungry, for I had been reluctant to leave off weaving to fish. I lay on my back then and bade her spit the mush directly into my mouth. She did so willingly, spitting into my maw as well several sharp objects I surmised at once were the cones, which crumbled on my tongue. Though I did spit out shell bits, and pick them from my lips and from between my teeth, my tongue burned as if stung. I dared not swallow for fear the shells be poisonous.

After a while the burning subsided, so I judged it but the consequence of a fish-frog prank! I constricted my gullet to swallow, and my tongue, though swollen, did waggle in my mouth as before. Thus, when it became too dark to weave, I passed the evening prattling, according to my custom. I called for Amie, who came not again, then called for the spider that had abandoned me. I would ask the mouth of mouths what boot it wait for driftwood, the esoteric price of cutting a tree, my prospect of finishing a seaworthy boat, the likelihood of reaching France, the

imminence of reunion with my wife. I asked and answered myself, and asked and answered again, as was my wont. Having talked myself to sleep, then, consider my great surprise, 'pon waking, to find myself unable to bid myself good morrow.

In vain the fingers of one hand then the other did walk past my lips, sortie between my jaws, and explore the salty cave behind my teeth. Where my tongue had rooted, there poked a stump which by wagging I could cajole to an idiot's speech, being now unable to voice half the words in my lexicon. In my disappointment I failed to remark the lumpiness swelling my cheeks, but lay all day in a damp hollow in the sand, shedding tears, too mournful and weak to weave.

I woke to discover Amie squatting above me, butting me with her forehead to be petted. Her puffed-out cheeks told me she intended to dribble gruel between my lips; though the gruel carry more shellfish to undo me, I was too weary and hungry to protest; I parted my lips. There came from my mouth then a faint squalling sound. When I stretched a finger gingerly into a cheek pouch, it warmed to the gentle clutch of one minuscule pair of arms, then another. By careful feints with the finger, I counted four—dare I call them infants? Two in each cheek pouch.

I surmised that I was in a condition I had never looked to be in—a condition in which I believe no member of my sex has been before. If MY PREGNANCY had not, my astonishment unmanned me. Of all men to be so enmarvelled, I, Pierre, who had not wished to breed—now, unnatural, quick! Yet I owed a duty to these young. Thus, I parted my lips and permitted Amie to flood my mouth with gruel, forbearing to swallow until by a manner of reckoning I had not known I possessed, I surmised my young had drunk their fill.

I did not sleep in my hut that night, nor any night of my gravidness, but lay curled in my dank hole by the sea, burning in the sun

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by day and shivering in the night's chill breeze. Yet I could not move, for the infants squealed most piteously did I but turn my head. At the end of my confinement I scarce opened my eyes and relied entirely on Amie to feed me, the tide to clean out my nest. I no longer worked on the half-woven sails, which later I found had dried and crumbled in the sun. My boat remained unfinished, two weathering pods by the side of my abandoned house. Nor did I dream of glory among savants or scheme much, now, to snatch Pélérine. I was suffused with tender thoughts for the young in my cheeks and thought of little else, but lay very still, crooning as best I could with a shortened tongue in a gravid mouth:

Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to

Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa ba-lu-ba wa!

Methought Marie Mandilé-Ba had crooned this refrain; she had learned the song from the sufferers beside her, when she was brought from Guinée. So I had been told by my godmothers, whose stories I were at greater and greater pains to recall—did the king whose wife turned into a coorucu bird lure her with barley grains or millet seeds?—even as now I had trouble recalling the names of animals and plants in patois, Latin, or French. I no longer knew the difference between Pintal's idea of faith and Nerf's. I had forgotten the names of Squint's ports of call. Alas! The prism conjure house were falling to ruin with my roof of thatch. Yet sometimes I saw it, whole and radiant in the sky, at the close of day, when the clouds are layered with colors, the colors with story.

To prompt my memory, I talked to myself in my head as my own blab school, mingling part-passages of authors with bits of moonlit story, but the effort was fatiguing. Soon enough I returned to crooning "Ba-wal loo-mah," which I could pronounce but as "ah-ah ah-ah," for I could not work my lips or move my tongue or jaws for fear of discommoding the young in my cheeks.

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From the corner of an eye, I looked down at the curve of a distended cheek, stretched taut across the squirm and kick of life within. Did I resemble the crack-cheeked cherub winds who blew above the roses, directing sailors to the world's four corners?

Alas! The erstwhile sailor was confined to his hold, prey to whatever vicissitudes of fortune befell him, most especially to caprice of tropical weather—to merciless sun and sudden storm. I dare not bestir myself to build another roof but must lie in my sea-side hole like a shelly fish. Yet I did not crave a dry bed as greatly as I craved companionship. For alas! Vérité no longer appeared to me in sky or water. My consort disappeared beneath the sea each evening. I feared the young in my mouth would follow at the breeching, be lost to me as talisman and memories. So I lived in moist apprehension, waiting.

Then push! Pull! Push! Pull! *Honor the Gods, though They cannot be seen. Pull! Push! Shining Great Ones, help with the breech. Stay here with me; do not fail! Push! Pull! Push! I beseech You, take care. Push! Push! Pull! I bear the honor of this birth with joy. Shining Great Ones! Push! Pull! Push! Though the storm in my cheeks undo me, I submit to the will that consumes.*

And when the inner storm subsided, FOUR OFFSPRING fell from between my teeth and tumbled into the sand before my face, squirming and squalling in the manner of human infants.

They were as helpless as any human babes, and indeed they bore the impress of my features, and had the lidded eyes of men, and toes on their feet, and skin, not scales, though mostly of mottled coloration. They had gills behind their ears, but noses as well; as they matured, the gill slits narrowed. They were fine, lusty fry, of a velvety, very dark green, though very much smaller than human young; all four could lie on their backs in the palm of my hand.

Curiously, they lacked those external organs by which we ascertain gender, having between their legs neither the stamen of the male nor the female's sepals and calyx. They had been reproduced; their presence in my hand proved progenitors. Yet, if they bore no organs of reproduction, how would they generate themselves? Here was a question for a philosopher, most especially one with a microscope. Be the offspring not hybrids, like mules, but without genitalia, 'twere likely their organs of reproduction were minuscule, as in certain plants that lack flowers. When he visited Montbard, Pierre would show his offspring to Buffon, for the great man had studied in his youth with a microscope the organs of animal reproduction.

The disciple of Buffon must here confess the disloyalty of framing a most Linnaean question—with what other creatures did his progeny fit in the great panoply of speciation? Yet Pierre had given birth to these offspring, so unlike himself. Did not their existence call into question the very notion *species*? Mayhap his offspring would give birth to creatures as unlike themselves as they were unlike Pierre. Mayhap a NEW FORM OF LIFE had sprung from Pierre's mouth as heroes had sprung from the forehead of Zeus-God in days of old. As Gods to men, so Pierre to his offspring, and his offspring to theirs.

Yet, since First Man and First Woman had been born of Damzilah, Gods had been Gods, men, men; were Pierre's offspring truly his offspring? If a man put a piece of food in another man's mouth, would young be born? Or if he put food in a woman's? Or a woman food in a man's mouth? Or a fishsprite in a man's? Could Pierre's young have been generated spontaneously, as flies, not from rotten meat or greasy rags, but from his tongue? And if Pierre's tongue were rotten or greasy, what had made it so? If Pierre had not gangrene, had not the pox, nor any buboes, he must be rotten in a manner of speaking; he must be rotten-wicked, his offspring a punishment. Now as he had been a slave,

his wickedness must have been the wickedness of a slave, viz., disobedience. Yet why had this punishment fallen only on him, and not, that he knew, on slaves who pilfered rum or wrecked the works or set fire to the cane? And what of the wickedness of masters, who drank rum in which their servants' bodies were dissolved? These questions, for which even now I have not the answers, much occupied me, even as I peered at the offspring waving their legs in the palm of my hand.

Now I cannot say these offspring altogether pleased me. Their very strangeness made me homesick for my godmothers' accounts of strangenesses haunting the world, viz., dog-faced demons who left point-eared babes in women's cradles, having spirited away the round-eared ones. Yet what parent warms not at the clasp of tiny fingers on his finger, the miracle the more apparent if the fingers of the babe do but grasp a hair on the parent's knuckle? Be these offspring sterile as mules, yet they would provide me companionship. Yea, if they could not, would not, gratify as children, then they would do as pets, to caper and fetch, to sit and roll 'pon my command, to slumber at the foot of my bedplace, if I did not kick 'em in my sleep.

The fry grew rapidly and soon toddled. *Jérôme Marie, Léo Charlotte, François Martine, Emile Hélène*: these were the names I gave them when they had lived past the ninth day and were no longer like to take fits. Having honored Uncle in the naming of the isle, I would gratify other Gods in the BAPTISM, the blessing by water, which honored in the bargain the cone-bearing parent. Indeed, in the water blessing, I did pay homage to Chenwiyi, banished bone-lord under the sea; yet first and foremost, inasmuch as I purposed a journey to France, I took a decision to baptize with Christian names and so honor the French (the deistic Not-God of certain aristocrats being necessarily indifferent to supplication, hence without servitors or names). So I proceeded in the manner of Père Gouy, though I could remember no scriptural

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texts, nor any suitable aphorisms of priests or philosophers, but only a comic line of de Vereau, spoken by Amouradet:

And so with firm resolve to be brave, and hopeful heart, we embark on our noble adventure.

I willingly acknowledge that these words are less than eminently suitable, and do not come from an author of consequence; I was forced to eke out the dignity of the occasion with scraps. Ah well! I commended my offspring to live as sensibly, and kindly, and joyfully as they could, injuring no creatures except the need arise to kill for food, and, even as haltingly shaped by my nub of tongue, these seemed precepts enough for young whose apprehension be but suck and slurp.

In time, I taught my offspring, in accordance with their names, not only Hail Marys and Pater Nosters, Credos and Confiteors, but the service of Uncle, the sacrifices required, the respect of trees, the manner of sending forth the dead. I taught them Chen-wiyi, Damzillah, Ogun, Steward God, the Hurdy-Gurdy God and various other Deities I had known, or heard of, not neglecting Gormilah. In this manner I sought to furnish my young with full benefit of HEAVEN'S GOOD WILL.

And, since the spider had vanished, my dear cowries had ceased to speak, I would teach my offspring to divine by a new system, not requiring the spider to interpret. Now Pierre was wont to divine by clouds, through staring into the air. Much he had seen in stones and water, much in shadow. Vérité saw in water, in fire, & in smoke. Pierre had known others who read the entrails of beasts or the skin or the bones; those who made much of names or numbers or the rumble of bellies, the shape of hands or of feet, of navels or of nails. He had known those who read the stars or the lees of wine, those who cast lots or threw dice.

Yet he thought he would teach his offspring to divine with coco shells, for these be abundantly present on the isle and are as clear

in their outlines as engravings, so suitable for the young to read. Thus, Pierre devised a system of COCO-DIVINATION RULES.

Now, THE FIRST RULE IS, the coco shell be broken with a stone, to which one bows as to the name of Uncle in pebbles. Broken with a stone! The cocos are not to be thrown on the ground as Jéro once did. Alas, poor Jéro! Punished when the Sea-One took his arm, which had been broken in a fall from a coco tree, and hung by a shred from his shoulder. And this She may have done as a courtesy to Uncle, though Jéro keened for his arm! So the Gods conspire if but one of their number take offense at the breach of custom, yea, even those customs tricked up to dazzle the young. So the Gods hold us to the portion we promise and jealously guard the rites we contrive.

And THE SECOND RULE IS, when the coco shells are broken for divining, the meat is divided into four parts, and these parts are thrown; the pattern of dark and light, up and down, speaks. And if all the shells come to land dark-up but one, we must pull our earlobes and open our eyes very wide, to show Uncle we are not afraid. Whereas, if all land dark-up, we must leave some food at the tideline, for the dead in the water are circling, and the ocean is calling someone's name, & so forth & so on.

Now proper observance keeps the dead from glassing over the waters; fish in the burble frolic and are easily caught. Thus the divinations and rites I had devised were well received. Let it not be supposed, however, that Pierre enjoyed an equal success in his attempts to teach his young the manners of civilized persons, such as they would meet in Montbard, viz., to wait for your betters to eat before you; to sip from a cup, rather than to lap from the water, sucking in greedy and ceaseless as a fish; to piss and shit in a privy place; to blow not the nose onto the common table; to make no untoward noise with mouth or arse. Nor let it be supposed that his offspring were quick to master the rudiments of reading and ciphering he sought to teach.

Did the pupils of Modeste Devere look longingly to sea and the prospect of sport? The more my progeny yearned from lessons, who could disappear beneath the waves for days, to return only when they supposed I had forgotten my wish to examine their knowledge of the Latin subjunctive or the Sermon on the Mount, a godmother's maxim or one of La Rochefoucauld. Erudition was not to be my offspring's forte.

Yet Jéro, Léo, Framo, and Émlo were versatile, tender sprites, now undines aflimmer in the watery element, now sylphs, leaping and turning in air, now gnomes digging into holes in land. And were their powers limited to these three of the four elements recognized by the ancients? Could my progeny, like salamanders, thrive in flame? Yet I had no flame, only a curious affinity for the paradox of flame. *Nutrisco et extinguo nul*. So be it. Though I live as an alchemist of old, secret and inventive, devising transformation, I need not take up my time with proofs in the cumbersome, inadequate categories of antique fools. Pierre be a man of the new ideas. *Sunt, ergo sunt*. Charmed or damned, chimeras, gorgons, cockatrice mongrels, my little crossters lived and breathed and had their being, and, from the wily inventiveness with which they avoided their lessons, it were apparent they thought. *Cogitent, ergo sunt*. Thinking, but slippery thinking, of lissome bodies sliding into sea. Yet, in their fishlike way, they grew to be as elegant, indeed, fully as elegant as the comely youth I had preened to discover in M'sieu's pier glasses, half as large, it is true, but every bit as game.

Now had my offspring been bondsmen, they would have prospered in learning a servile obedience mixed with a shifty resourcefulness, a swiftness to master any useful task, combined with a wily apprehension of the posture suited to any situation, to serve, to dissemble, to fawn, to grovel, to rebel but in secret. Yet this EDUCATION would not suit free beings, slipping in and out of the sea. As theirs was a freedom less of privilege or rank than of

ease and grace, they need not learn dominion or a masterful manner. Yet if they were to mingle in the world on terms, they must learn a forthcoming confidence. They must judge the usefulness of others, and inspire loyalty beyond their kind. So I must urge them to brighten their moist, even temper, yes, cultivate in them a radiance of manner. Were my offspring boys, with wombs in their mouths? Girls, who had no breasts? If my young bore no gender at all—then how should I train them for their places in the world? I must abandon all precept and watch. Whatever I teach them, I must preserve them and extricate them from harm, viz., a foot trapped in a crevice.

I sought to teach by example, prattling to myself with my stub of a tongue. Lest it has not been made evident: my young have all been born with tongues, and taught, however slurred and indistinct, an excellent SPEECH, first by me, and later, as my tongue did diminish even further, by siblings. 'Tis true, the faculty of speech dwindles with the loss of the tongue during progressive confinements, but sing we can into old age, through shaking the cords in our throats, a song very like the chirping of birds. And indeed, my offspring do most copiously chirp, spouting maxims, flaunting commonplace, yet I have never been assured they sing for the meaning. Rather, they may sing but pattern and rhythm. Yet beauties they spout and seem to know.

Émlo was first to write in sand, where the tide would wash it out, enigma, viz., “the sea-starved sea.” Be the like an exhortation to understanding? The expression of a sentiment? There is no response but to write in turn “O milk of light” or “Slippery glass of the past,” conning my own enigmas no more fully than my offspring’s. So we have proceeded, obliquely, by contraries, trusting our fingers.

Tireless water rompers, merry souls with ready laughs, by day my offspring frolic in the shallows or dive beneath the sea. In the evening they wait with me for their mother—or is she, or he, their

father?—to come with food. In time other sea shades have joined Amie, to spit fish and cones in our mouths and have their foreheads rubbed. So we live a most congenial household, half in, half out of the sea.

Yes, but Pierre has not always been satisfied with this watery and domestic idyll. Consider the OBSERVATION OF PARTICULARS that were the very foundation of Pierre's cyclopedish oeuvre. By means of CLOSE OBSERVATION, he had discovered as a youth the true and marvelous nature of the changeling. 'Twas OBSERVATION enabled him to school himself beyond mere reading and ciphering. (Observation and mayhap diligence.) Through OBSERVATION he discerned the multivarious virtues of his wife. 'Twas OBSERVATION furnished Pierre with confidence to saw his boat-pod-holds from keg halves and patience to weave his sails from silver-thatch. If he would OBSERVE his young, he must note the particularity of each, yet they frustrated him in their slippery comings and goings, for in truth they looked as much alike as the pupils in a school of fish. Yet was I firm in my scrutiny; I applied my powers of observation most vigorously and so learned to distinguish them. Émlo was smaller than the others, and most resembled me, for his flesh was tinted a pleasing earthy black, with a fine texture of skin not much marked by bronzy spots. Léo had been born with a twisted leg and with different-sized ears. Through a large one, he heard nothing at all; yet through a tiny one he could hear the landing of a bird on a ledge across the isle.

This Léo, alas, had been cut with the adze I had chipped from volcanic obsidian and fastened with thatch rope into a split handle, only to see the binding break, the adze fly out of the split. The blade cut to the bone my Léo's already twisted leg, causing him to bleed profusely—bright red blood, had I doubted it. I could but stanch the flow by wrapping more of the rope around his leg, and twisting it tight with the handle of the adze to make a

tourniquet, which I implored Jéro and Framo hold, praying they would not be distracted by the prospect of dinner flashing in the nearby sea-water, as so often they had been when I donned my pedagogue's hat. I prayed harder still, I must confess, my young would not prove to be incarnations of Squint's anthropophagi, frenzied by the smell of a brother's blood. Yet I need not have worried, for Jéro and Framo held the splint as tight against Léo's wounded leg as any well-trained surgeon's apprentices; I stitched the wound shut with a fishbone needle and thread unraveled from my shreds of a shirt. And we laid our Léo in a nest that the tide cleansed of blood even as the blood seeped from the wound, and after a while the bleeding abated.

I enjoined Émlo, then, hasten with me to collect tree moss so as to cover the wound, and keep filth out of it till it heal. Émlo sat on his haunches looking out to sea, then put his lips to the water and emitted a barking, rattling, shrieking whistle, a gurgling yelp that stirred the waters to roil and bubble like some infernal concoction brewed in Gormilah's kettle. Had his grief robbed him of his wits, my feckless child?

Upon my return with a bundle of moss to dress Léo's wound, I saw that Émlo's agitation of the sea kept circling sharks at bay. For though they were drawn to the blood that reddened the water, spreading from the nest where Léo lay, they feared the foam and noise that spread from Émlo's lips, and they cruised at a distance. Thus, we had time to move Léo to a nest beyond the tide line.

My offspring's useful art of repelling shark-attack I thought to practice myself, that I might navigate beneath the surface of the sea without fear of predation. Then I could search for the underwater aeries of the fish-sprite consorts, my undine paramours, to penetrate some little into the mystery of my offspring's hybrid parturition. But my mouth parts were unsuited to the agitation of any sufficient amount of water to discomfit sharks; nor could I

reproduce the timbre and pitch of shrieks and whistles that discomfited the enemy fish; nor indeed (though I had long ago learned to propel myself through the water with gusto and efficiency) did my body flatten beneath water's weight, to round again as I rose to the top; nor could I hold my breath long enough to follow offspring and consorts down to the bottom of the encircling reef that surrounded our island as a halo the head of Marie-Vierge. A great horror stifled me when I could not breathe. This horror, the greater the further down, my offspring knew not.

DOWN they went and down still, whilst my lungs throbbed with desperate need to be filled again with air. So I flailed in panic for top, though I had glimpsed the consorts' sapphire and amethyst dwellings, always just below me, and floating before them, their pearly paladins caparisoned in glimmering streamers. Or were the streamers linelike arms that trawled for specks of dusty light suspended in the columnate sea, which the spine-coifed consorts ate? Gold I saw, coins and plate, and ship-wrecked sailors, floating, transparent, without a will of their own, turning when the schools of rainbow fish did turn, and turn again, searching as one for food. Among these wraithy, wracked phantoms turned others of a more uniformly dusky hue, like air that is colored with smoke. Slaves who had died on the passage, thrown overboard, their legs still chained, swayed among the fish that kiss the bottom where the rays whip their tails and luff their edges in the blurry gloom. The irons of these damned ones would not fall off till their kelp-draped bones rot. And did such a specter hold in bony hands a driver caught by the throat?

Deeper still, sitting cross-legged on the bottom, His long hair floating out from His head to tangle Him as in weeds, the banished bone-lord Chenwiyi, Who ravished His mother even while the God Uncle tore Her apart with awful hands of wind and stone. And Chenwiyi collected Her bones from the chaos over the edge of the world where Uncle God had thrown them. And some of

them Chenwiyi buried in the earth, and the rest He collected and clutched to His breast. And He dove into the sea to escape Uncle God, to whom Chenwiyi still holds out His bone-filled hands, imploring—or was He holding out to me my talisman pouch?

Or did I see, not Chenwiyi, but a sea-shade consort, embracing another, who resembled him or her? Yet the consorts had no pudenda, so they could not copulate, and indeed, my mouth be the womb. Were the consorts then sodomites? Mayhap these were no consorts, but the dead, tipped off their rafts, who embrace, not to engender, but to celebrate the wisdom they have stored up since Creation, lo, in the thousands of years since unfolding.

No matter how deep I dove, wonders shimmered out of reach, as ephemeral as the mirages in desert air said to haunt thirsty Camel-Packers with evanescent watery shine. What had I seen? What could I know? What was true? Alas, my sojourns in the watery depths had corroded and spoiled my confidence. I wondered; I wondered. Oh, I wondered.

And this shift, watery wondering began to wear away Pierre's good sense as the persistent coy waves will wear away a rock exposed to their ceaseless entreaty. A tormenting SUSPICION lodged in Pierre's heart as a grain of sand in a shoe. I came to wonder if the offspring who returned to me night after night were those I had borne at expense of my tongue, and they had borne at expense of theirs. Even Émlo, dear little Émlo, I came to doubt I knew, and Léo with his scarry, twisted leg. Framo who cocked his head and winked an eye, one-armed Jéro who wrinkled his brow like a troubled bookkeeper—mayhap there were more than one of each. They were not my progeny at all, but had been hatched in my mouth as the changeling is hatched in the bee-hive, to feed himself in wreaking devastation. And my naming of these creatures be no more than a sentimental conceit, for others like them were born wherever the shells could batten on flesh in a moist, dark hole.

Yet one of them bore an indisputable sign. The shiny scar on Léo's leg recalled those other cicatrices, the master's mark written on our skins with the silver iron. With this iron the branding crew—the same that in another season marked the cattle—did sear each new boy or girl from the tanks, or baptize in fire a newborn, or run over another planter's burn, or mark as Cain a reprobate. To mark was to know, to know to own. And so Pierre—having caught beneath the sea a sickness cured neither by gulping draughts of air nor by hugging the land while he drained—was seized by a sinful and covetous wish to BRAND HIS YOUNG.

Yet he could not brand without burning, or burn without fire, and fire he did not possess. Words had brought flame to his hand, words on a tea label. But Amie had stolen his labels; he had no papers to attract fire; he must bring it some other way, for Uncle did not spark in his naked hand. Glass he coveted, glass to focus the rays of the sun. Lying on his back in a pod of his boat, looking up at the sky, he saw in the clouds a wondrous engine, a bow on a spindle, the rapid revolution of which spun fire. Yet though this be an ingenious engine—as good as Buffon's mirror—for one in a civil country to patent, here the patent must be shift. Pierre settled on the homely expedient of the boy who brought honey home to his sister, who had stunned the bees with smoke from a fire made by frotting sticks. Pierre hunched over a shabby pile of wispy, chippy debris, frotting, frotting, frotting, huffing and puffing on the spark that fell at last on specks of crumbled frond and desiccated sea-weed, blowing till a flame sprang up.

Yet he did not cherish that flame for its heart of blue; all his effort were bent to A SCHEME. In a frenzy of will, he pillaged his weathering boat for a hoop, which he pounded with stones to flatten and lengthen, and filed against rocks to point. He pillaged his boat again for staves to devise a tongs of wood with which to lift the hot iron. And now he fed his hungry fire the driftwood he had collected for his balance frame and raft. More and more of his

cache he fed his greedy flame, for his iron must be red-hot each time he dropped it on a child's shoulder. He must get the children the first time he tried, and get them from the back, so they knew not what hurt them, else they would shun him. Now if they shun him, what boot it he had marked them? Ah well, he must win back their trust; he would carve them tops and dancing Jacks. He would teach them Blind Man's Bluff and Tag and Catch. There would be Treasure Hunts. The young would each endure but a moment's pain, to be marked and subsequently known. Framo, the largest and sturdiest—Pierre would start with him.

So Pierre lured Framo to his fire on the pretext of a game of N'importe-Quoi-Donc, having made of well-matched, well-rounded pebbles a pair of dice. But even as the brand was glowing above the shoulder of the trusting fish-sprite enraptured by the roll of dice, a spider walked across a hearth stone. Vérité's visage shone in the calabash of water that Pierre had brought to cool the iron. The spider voice hissed in his ear, *Mouth of Mouths. Know what you know.* And Pierre's heart stayed his hand. He could not burn his offspring's flesh. He pulled what was left of his shirt off his shoulder, and saw there the *D*, and cried aloud. Though he had been burned as an infant, he remembered the pain. So he extinguished his fire. He did not keep it burning to ward off merry-wings, but ate of the ashes each day until they were gone, as a gesture of ATONEMENT, and drove the point of his mother's hook through the lobe of his ear, as a penance, and wears this ear-hook still, as he writes.

How could Pierre have doubted the offspring's singularities? Who but Framo had that deep, croaking voice, those long arms, and that large, square head? Who but Jéro that smaller, narrower head with one protruding eye in the middle of his wrinkled forehead, one arm and a breathy voice?

How could Pierre, son of suffering, husband of injustice, who bore on his own body the cruel mark of proprietorship, have so

forgotten who he was that he sought to brand his young as chattel beasts? O Master Pierre! 'Twere vile and 'twere futile. His offspring can no more be owned than the sea. Nor do they seek to own, or to master, nor even to set themselves apart from their fellows with trifling, portentous distinctions, viz., the difference between breeches and drawers.

Like the consorts, my offspring are neither exclusive nor proprietary, though they are faithful as tides. They remember and forget and remember again, attaching neither importance nor sentiment nor any anxious apprehension to what can neither be kept nor lost. For them, COMMONALITY is complete, all attributes glimmering & changeable, like light on the surface of the sea.

They play all their games in a group, Troll-Madame & Lasquenet & Papillon, & games of their own devising, with rules I cannot fathom, for they never take their turns in the same order. All they do, they do all together, frolicking and rollicking, sharing their gruel among themselves and with me. An observer might say they are not individuals of a mongrel species, but one manifold orchidaceous organism. What boot their singularities to them? How could I have presumed to own what grows for itself and for whatever Gods there be? How could I have doubted the solid ties of an affection beyond affection, a communality beyond loyalty or kin? How indeed! I vowed to stay out from under the water that had addled my wits and confounded my morals.

For even if Pierre's young be parasites, who exist but to be preyed on by other parasites, for ends that will be forever hidden under the sea, still he could never abandon them now. For by his very-near cruelty he had joined his fate to theirs, and lost his independence. Moreover, in his zeal, he had burnt all the wood collected for his raft; now he must start again. And now he must have a very large raft, like the ARK OF NOAH, for if he sail to France, he must take as many of his young as wished to go, and could not

presume they were good for so long a swim. No, they might tire, and must be able to climb aboard a solid craft. There must be room as well for Vérité; he must steal her as other maroons steal beef or rum. (Nor would it hurt their cause to purloin these commodities.) And what of his godmothers, and Jean-François? Sure Squint he could leave behind, for Squint could take care of himself. Besides, he was yellow enough to pass for white, if he live among whites too poor to escape being browned by sun.

Now often Pierre looked into his cistern, and in the mirror of the water he saw Vérité, building ever-larger subtlety ships for Dufay's banquets, and indeed, forcing Dufay to ever-larger displays of hospitality, to accommodate the ever-more elaborate subtleties he would flaunt. Hers be no mere rafts, but true ships with twelve tall masts, and twelve times twelve sails, and rigging like the webs of a hundred spiders. Does Dufay inquire why all the subtleties now are nautical? Does he know she will one day launch? Does he shrug, supposing sugar will not hold against water? He might be amazed to discover, she has baked in a cyclopedish ark, so large it must be fired in a volcano's fiery throat, two of every bird M'sieu has drawn for Buffon.

So Vérité would come to Pierre. Meanwhile he must do his part. He must educate his fishy offspring, not only to charm, but to perform useful work. Thus would Pierre ensure, they would not be perceived among the savants of France or among Pierre's kinsmen in Guinée, as abominations. He must train his offspring to present far beyond expectation, so they impress, not as talking fish that amuse little more than a dog walking on its hind legs, but as PERSONS.

Yet if they were PERSONS, their PERSONHOOD lay partly in their fishiness. Were there some respect in which HUMANNESS might be married to FISHINESS, beyond what Pierre had hitherto conceived? Pierre much occupied himself in like rumination. Often he bailed the rainwater from a pod of his boat, and lay back

in it, and looked up at the sky, and saw floating there in the reef of clouds, not only birds, but fishes. And he recalled then M'sieu's aversion to the finny creatures and their element. Indeed, Pierre recalled the stiff-fillet portraits M'sieu had sent for Buffon's *histoire*. And Pierre vowed to teach his offspring to be FISHY PHILOSOPHERS. Their HISTOIRE would relate the annals of FISH, that M'sieu had so egregiously neglected.

Commencing with the *exempli* of birds, then, that Pierre himself knew well, he would teach to fishy end the methodology of Buffon, viz., OBSERVATION, AND PHILOSOPHIZING UPON OBSERVATION, yet with a magnanimous spirit; for to grasp the nature of any creature, one must be able to see before one the whole history of the beast, "their procreation, gestation period, the time of birth, number of offspring, the care given by the mother and father, their education, their instincts, their habitats, their diet, the manner in which they procure food, their habits, their wiles, their hunting methods," & so forth & so on.

And so Pierre's young, having observed with him the common thrasher and the oven thrush and the spackled beater-wing, did then plunge into the element of their greatest affinity, the sea, and commence to record the habits and proclivities of ladyfish and puffers; grunts, wrasses, and tallywags; surgeonfish and triggerfish; parrotfish and snappers. And not only these fish, well known to the denizens of Saint-Michel, even to sea-anxious Dufay, but other fish, quite unknown, that lived far down. And among these the whipperlux and needlenose, the whiskered grumpkin and rainbow skate—for so we have named them.

And not only fin-fish, my offspring observed, but shellfish, pearl-oysters, limpets, slippersnails, murexes; and scuttling hardskins, viz., the crab. Of the latter my offspring discovered several varieties that lived very far down, which shattered when brought to the top, which we called the glass-skins, viz., the glass-skin blue, the glass-skin double-claw, the glass-skin mottle. And

further down than the glass-skinned crabs, peculiar creatures, very tall columnar jellies with rootlike toes grasping the rocks on the floor of the sea. They have no arms nor any discernible motility, yet though they take in water and release it again, their bodies swelling and sagging. And with these columnates on the ocean floor, shellfish as large as houses, which very rarely close their doors, but constantly expose their meat to the watery element, for they have no enemies there at the fundament.

And a serpent worm, mayhap of the species that had swallowed me, lying quiet beside another, the two copulating in manner hermaphroditic, each with its male organ quivering in the other's female, the great scaly bodies trembling among the quiet, invisible legions of dead, yet with shimmers of iridescence sparkling along their spinal fins, what seemed to be the full length of the beasts. For my offspring (though their gaze well penetrate the murk at the bottom) could see neither head nor tail. Nor did my offspring possess—even they!—the stamina and strength to paddle to the distant tails or heads of the beasts, but must extrapolate from the evidence of the middles, shaking and finning. (I did inquire whether my offspring had seen the bone-lord Chenwiyi, sitting on the bottom of the sea with His mother's ribs in His arms. "Perhaps worm food," Framo surmised.)

Yet my offspring's most NOTABLE DISCOVERIES were not on the bottom of the sea, nor even on top, but on the very Isle of the Uncle, which I believed I had so thoroughly perused. Still I had not observed the pinket tiny tiny, that minuscule blossom that flourishes in the narrow dark depths of certain crannies. Nor observed the scrubby stink-fruit bush, which grows on the rocky ledges where gulls roost, near the promontory where I had speared Amie.

And these botanical discoveries revealed the breadth of the powers for observation my offspring possessed. Truly, Pierre had

bred up a lineage of PHILOSO-FISH SAVANTS! These knowings must not be lost!

Because we had not ink to write—having found no medium to fix squid's pigment—and no paper—inasmuch as my palm-weavings were too coarse for sharpened plume to inscribe—I taught my offspring to build their own conjure house. Yet when I had told them what I could of how I had constructed mine, I was amazed to discover they already had their own, though they had not hitherto stored in it provision Pierre would call Philosophic. It is different from human conjure houses, in that it is shared; they wander in it together, as if they had no minds of their own, but furnished out the rooms of a common one. And this be not so different from the common ground between the memory houses of humans, who speak to one another by whatever means. Yet my offspring need not such artifacts as books, or any conversation, but know each other's thought through a sensitive affinity that we humans do not possess. Though I had classified my offspring as less than myself, indeed, as parasites, they had powers a human had not. They speak and write to humor their progenitor!

And by such shifts as these, Pierre came to a separate view from Buffon of the gulf the great man had charted between humans and other creatures. For if the offspring be *exemplum*, this gulf were no deep chasm, that is impossible to cross, but a sea, in which all creaturely conception floats. Among animals, humans alone float upon it entirely ignorant, some more than others. For when the Gods speak to us, through shadows or water or stones, we are being furnished with provision from a great COMMON STORE at which the coco shells but hint.

I who had observed the web of life in its aggrandizement, nay, had wandered across it a blind spider—I yearned more than ever to present my findings to other savants, along with those of my

philosophish young. So Vérité would recover in honor a husband who had fled in disgrace, however ill-deserved. Yet more than the unfinished state of my ship, more than my obligation to my fishy progeny, who did not all crave a journey to France, I was held to my island by MY OWN SPECULATION. For never did I cease to inquire why the sea shades chose to grace me, as later my offspring, with cones. Where do the sea shades come from? Are they born, or created in some other manner?

Chenwiyi fell as a stone to the bottom of all that is, holding the bones of sorrow. From these bones, were the consorts born? How else can Pierre explain the attraction of the consorts to the tongue of one who knows the story of Chenwiyi? Sea ribs and earth ribs, joined at last.

Pierre sometimes lay on his back in a pod of his ruined boat, the iron rusted, the wood weathered silver. He looked up at the clouds and saw them, fading, dissolving, rotting—rotting and fruiting, rotting and fruiting. Rotting and fruiting and CHANGING. And all the past since Creation might have been for him one single design of Providence, that had brought Pierre to this place. He lay on his back in his foundered boat, watching the clouds give birth to themselves, celestial aether, fruit to fruit, a tree of life that branches in death, the sacred tree that sailor-man shepherd-man Jason saw. At the close of day, the sun-gilt twigs finer than threads of the thinnest-spun sugar; the tree hung with gold-illuminated sugar leaves that looked to that shepherd-man sailor like fleeces of golden perfect wool, golden fleece between a golden woman's legs, the legs of the Sea-One, stretched gold and purple at close of day, Her labia opening, closing, opening, closing. In the gloaming, huge and seraphic, cloud-water vulva, opal and pearl, the Sea-One passionate in gathering storm, passionate yet perfect, immaculate and perfect as all conception. Now there would be a subtlety to ravish!

## PART THE EIGHTH

### *The Old Temptation*



That the Deities move on the face of earth and water in a manner most mysterious, has been revealed to me, not only in the inwardness of my reverie and the outward grace of my progeny, but in one other most purely miraculous gift that Providence has bestowed upon me since our fish-sprite dynasty was established. This generous gift did consist in my being granted, once again, to look on the features of a purely HUMAN COUNTENANCE and hear the syllables of purely HUMAN SPEECH.

Strolling in the weedy-smelling wrack-trace of a storm, to see how the shape of my isle had shifted in the tide, Pierre discovered rolling and slapping in sea wash a slime-white form which he took at first for that of a moribund fish sprite. Yet upon circumambulating the putrid, puffy creature, he discerned the veiny feet were not flippered ones, with membrane between the toes, but twitching digits of a pallid, sea-wrinkled, lepriferous-looking person, in gender male, one no longer young, who feebly groaned at my approach. I knew him, I swore, as I turned him over, knew his dissipated, water-logged, scapegrace face. He were—Pamphile! Had he come to claim me? Trembling and leery, I started and stopped,

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guarding my liberty, fearful still of rack, of dog, of Four-Post and Stinger. Yet here on this isle the master lo! these many years be I! *Master thyself, then, I muttered. Be master in more than name! And if master, be worthy of thine elevation, for thou knowest full well the piteous condition of a derelict.*

However much my erstwhile tormentor, who had stolen my talisman from my neck, Pamphile had been my benefactor, who had passed to me with toes-out shoes the barely used A-B-C's that had been my refuge and consolation. I would not abandon him helpless.

So I did approach him, and pour fresh water between his lips. I lugged him to a shady nook and nursed him as tenderly as I had nursed Amie, when I had speared and hurt her. And dappled by a tender palm-leaf light, fanned by solicitous Zephyr, he breathed more easily. Yet soon he was afflicted with a terrible fever that shook his frame with shivering. I sprinkled water on his lips, and he opened his eyes. He sat up on his frondy pallet; though he stared ahead as one who has waked from death, he knew me. "Goody!" he cried, "You maroon Devil! Have you come for me from Hell?"

I could scarce explain with the scanty grunts my stub-tongue—oh, my fish-sprite concubines! I wished once again I had never indulged in unnatural affection that unvoiced me. I patted Pamphile's hand and nodded and smiled. He pulled on the hook I wore in my ear, and pointed to his own mouth, then to my mouth and his ear. How was I, with my stubble-dumb tongue, to speak? I shook my head. Again he pointed to ears and mouths. He would not be gainsaid! I must reveal how well I wrote. Inscribing on a broadleaf platter of wet sand the particulars of my condition, I did entreat him to tell me his needs; for though I spoke with great trouble, I could hear quite well. Thus did he commence to speak.

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If I but close my eyes, I am a bonded boy in his first set of drawers, who stumbles beneath a heavy load, while his master, unburdened, pontificates from his horse. Flora & fauna & fauna & flora. If I but keep my eyes closed, the boy becomes a proud youth in a passed-along coat, dreaming over accounts. Already he hears in his head the voices of savants, authors whose ruminations free him from bondage long before he escapes.

Would there pour from Pamphile's lips the liquefaction of patois, lilt of comfort and callaloos? To him, ours were but a nursery language he would not deign to speak. Even so, I had been granted a boon I could not sniff or peck at, though the individual the sea had vomited at my feet were never a philosopher with wit to banter, but ever an impulsive and petulant rake, weaker in wit than in will. This Pamphile now were much inclined to relate his history; he would not husband his strength.

To tell me how he came here would shake his frame with hellish laughter, so he said, which he feared would jelly his bones, yet he would go on. He had launched himself on a funeral raft of the servants, to escape the wanton conflagration engulfing his father's plantation, a fiendish REBELLION—he checked himself, yet he would go on.

“Had I not been carousing with a fancy girl,” he rasped, “I might have saved our fortunes from ruin. I might have roused my tranced father, called the militia before the hands whom we had clothed and fed burned the house, the fields, the boiling shed, warehouses, stables—all! Yet I have paid for my folly, having watched my hapless father, the inveterate loather of water and fishes, swamped in the storm from which you have salvaged the wreck of my life.”

So he spoke, the débauché, no less the fool for his white hairs. Had my fellows razed and pillaged all they had labored to build?

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"Pray, what occasion?" These words I tried to shape with my mutilated tongue, then shrugged and wrote in the sand.

"His wife, my stepmother, had died before," whispered Pamphile. "I cannot say I lament her passing, the scheming vixen, yet who could be indifferent to the manner of it? For she died of some suppurating sores on her breasts, from which such hideous worms did emerge upon her expiration, my father shrank from touching her. On pain of the lash, he ordered the cowering housemaids dress her body.

"M'sieu! M'Sieu! Have mercy!' they cried. They would rather have risked the whip or the block than touch their mistress's wormy corpse.

"The field hands then declared they would dress the body themselves, so as not to see the women suffer for refusing. The hands of those bucks on my stepmother's person my father never would stomach, nor the mutinous negotiation of his slaves, and so he bid his driver—Tom, you recall—Tom Squint—my father bade Tom whip 'em all, which the driver refused to do, declaring it monstrous unjust to make the people pay for their terrors. So astonished was my father at this cool rebellion on the part of his driver, his temper vaporized into amazement. He subsided to an inner room, where he occupied himself in sketching. He forbade all intercourse with the corpse that had been his spouse; she lay 'neath a blue-green blanket of flies for a very great number of days.

"Finally Squint sneaked into her room through a balcony window, even as a lover, to beat off the flies. He discovered not only worms in her breasts, but maggots along her spine—the once-fair flesh, now most vile. Yet her grim-jawed suitor persevered. Snuffing up some dried rose petals the wench had spread in a pretty dish, Squint bundled her sleeping form, that oozed and crawled with life, and tossed her over his shoulder. And despite the protests of S n gal, who had poked his head through the cracked

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door, Squint carried her over the balcony rail, like one eloping, to rendezvous in a pit of clay. Though if he buried her, sneezing rose petals in the ditch, or sequestered her body in a vault he carved in the reef, no one saw him.

"Hastening to tell my father she had been taken, S  n  gal left ajar the door of the room where she had lain. A peeping maid discovered she was gone, and the wretch cried aloud in fright, 'Baron has come. The Baron has come and taken her. Woe! Driving his silent horses, Mist and Dread, Baron has stolen her body. Now poor mistress wakes in a strange place. She dashes with startled heart through Baron's foggy fields, pursued by his bodiless dogs, their bark so awful silent. Oh why were there no rites?' And so on and so on, nefarious mewling and puling, contagion that spread through the yard, for S  n  gal but shrugged and refused to gain-say the rumors. My father, gone slack, would not have the babbling housemaid flogged, or his recalcitrant butler, but protested he would have buried his wife himself, by filling with dirt the room where she lay. Already the slaves were muttering against him. He was a marked man, they said, a marked man.

"That very night the house burned down. And Squint could not be found for the bucket brigades, nor could S  n  gal, nor the boiler Beloo (whom we continued to feed though his carelessness had burned his fingers to useless stubs), while the field hands—who had given them rum?

"My father swung no buckets but stared at his burning house as if it were another's property. He called for his inks. Most carefully, precisely, and minutely, he drew the house, not as it glowed before him in flames, but as it had been, white-washed, dignified, four-square above the bay. . . ."

Pamphile paused to draw his breath. I chafed his hands and chuckled to ponder the unwonted calm of choleric Dufay as he viewed the lurid scene, his fields all charred, his house an inferno,

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his drunk hands brandishing bits of his clothes and his plate, capering to the suck of the harp, the racket of the drum, laughing and showing for once their teeth. Serenely he paints the house in the shadowless calm of an ultimate noon. And the hands who loom with picks and bills fall back into smoky gloom, fearful what subtle devil has evicted his wits and camped in their erstwhile precinct.

"The girl had roused me from a sound sleep," wheezed Pamphile, "yet I saw at once there must be no delay. I pleaded with my father, who stared round-eyed at my protestation we must fly or lose lives with fortunes. On my knees I implored him, and gave the girl my purse for her help. With but one half-shuttered lantern to light our way along a rocky path, we trundled my father's person, not to our quay, for they had already burned all our boats, but to a landing on the shore, where the hands beached an ancient tub we had given them for fishing. Even if two men bailed, it shipped so much water, it would never carry them far away. Yet this tub too had been set alight and was a glowing ghost of itself, a crimson ember boat that fell to ashes as we watched.

"But one craft remained seaworthy, the narrow raft on which lay the bloated corpse of a field hand, I knew not which one, who had died, I knew not how, yet which the slaves had covered with orchids and odd little bundles of leaves. I did not doubt this body, rubbed with oil to a dark shine, had been prepared for a funeral, then forgotten in the *mêlée*. I crossed myself, yet we must make use of the means to hand. As the girl cried out angrily, I tipped the body into the wash.

"Under the garlanded negro lay curled as a babe the naked worm-eaten corpse of my father's wife. Someone had closed her eyes and weighed down the lids with stones, but no-one had bound up her jaw. Her mouth opened blue and terrible between her teeth; she screamed a scream as loud as the end of the world. My father, who never had paid her mind in her life, fell to his

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knees before her corpse and clutched her stiff little feet. He sobbed and moaned, oblivious to his own fate. This corpse too, I tipped into the sea. He threw himself on it, blubbering in the wash.

"I shook him and shook him, to no avail, then slapped him, God forgive me. Then he was still. I bade him lie on his belly on the raft, which he did. Now he was docile as a child. I lay on top of him and bade the girl, who was already counting the coin in my purse, shove us off. With the now unshuttered lantern 'twixt my legs, to light us through the shoals to open sea, I paddled with frantic hands, helped by the tide's running out. Yet before I could fix what way might take us to the Spaniards, the wind rose. A fierce storm vented its blast upon us, to smite us with pounding strength. As the raft rocked perilously back and forth, the lantern slid into the sea. That we might keep our balance, I entreated my father paddle with me, yet he answered not. I jabbed at his calves with my toes, yet still he answered not. I pummeled his ribs and head with my fists, yet still, silence. Then rose a wave larger than all the others, which swept us up to the heavens and suspended us over the void, then dashed us to chaos. The raft was o'erturned. My distracted father sank from sight."

Tears rolled down Pamphile's cheeks. He was mourning the irascible master who had educated me to spite his fellows, and raised me to save the hire of a keeper of accounts, and granted me the freedom of the library. He was mourning the master who had saved my wife but sold my mother. Sold her! And ground up my brothers in his sugar mill! And now he spoke of the whites in the big house as if they alone possessed their fates, as if they had not lived on the backs of so many slaves like myself, who also had the effrontery to possess their fates! Oh, what of my godmothers? My wife? Did all my connexion perish in the rising?

"*Vérité?*" I wrote in my sand-slate. "*Marie-Jeanne and Jean-François?*"

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Pamphile screwed up his face. The demands of a new courtesy addled wits that were already addled by water, yet I must grant him gameness.

"Marie-Jeanne . . . Marie-Jeanne . . . ah, Full-Bags!" he cried. "Jean-François! By 'Jean-François' you mean *Sénégal*! And Vérité, Vérité, you must mean the cook! Yes, Douce Farouche, that witch. Well now, Goody, I forgot you married that barren cripple. Yes, and in that, and to tell truly, that only, disappointed Papa—before you fled, that is—for you are a comely fellow, who might have been bred for excellent foals—excellent!"

This rude fool were never master of his tongue. I wished he were well and strong, so I might slap him, to call him out to duel, as heroes do in tragedies.

"I would know what became of my wife," I muttered through my clenched teeth. Of course he could not make out my words; I must draw the letters on my slate.

"Ah! If you must know, the wench was freed."

"Freed when she was old and too crippled to work?"

His soaked conscience was not entirely ruined, for he squirmed as he lay on my lap.

"Ah, Goody, do not lay on me that charge. Mayhap she was old and hunched till the boat set her down on the little neighbor isle, Saint-Jean-de-Mer—you must remember, where they go for herbs. To the maroons, she went, the crooked shrew. Yet her manumission had an effect so rejuvenating, I wish it might revive my own drenched flesh. Yes, Her Slyness straightened fast when she was freed! Imagine! A surly hunch transformed to a snarling amazon! La Terreur! Mayhap it was she, your sorceress wife, who sneaked back onto our place to call up the rising that burned it. But the fleeing planters of Saint-Domingue, where the rising had commenced, would swear they had desried in the vanguard of the bilious army foaming over the land 'Your cook,' so they threw it

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up in our faces when their boats landed them amongst us, 'Your cook!'

"Though lame she strode like Joan before her army of raggy ruffians. Her Slippery Slyness now stood firm, her lame foot holding her fast as a root to earth, her chest swelled up. She sailed as on a wind before her men, flying for her flag, 'twas said, a lady's gown of very fine stuff, yet splashed with blood. Even so she called up the rising, she!"

I had no doubt it was Vérité.

"But what—?" I wrote on my platter of sand, "What be the nature of this rising?"

Pamphile stared at me, as he might at a man who said he had seen his own ghost. He shook his head.

"Am I delirious," he murmured, "to rave of these fearsome events to a treacherous maroon, who has me at mercy? Ah well, 'tis no time to mince nice. You are as far from these events as I; the world goes on without us both. I will tell you, Goody, the topsy-turvy, some say it is general, and may soon o'ertake the entire world. The throwing down of all enlightened good, the rising of a dark, chaotic evil—everywhere! And of course, on Saint-Domingue, and on our Saint-Michel, the hands rose up, and snatched their miserable freedom, even as the drudges of France had taken theirs, by force of numbers, and, yes, by a kind of right, one sees, if one puts aside one's own interest. . . . yet they were inflamed, inflamed by the words of heedless prophets, men like that English incendiary, Locke, and Paine—"

*"Snatched their freedom?"* I wrote on my sand-slate.

"That fool Lafayette—"

*"And were not caught and whipped?"*

"Well, Citizen, I see you know nothing. So much the worse for you! You rely for this news on one good as dead, a chill creeping up from his feet. Well, I join a good frolic, death topping death

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topping death. And rogue Napoleon—I see you frown—you do not know of the King who lost his head—and the carnival of corpses—the litter of bones and death in the streets—then that King of Fools, that parvenu Corsican general tricked up as angel of justice, climbed on the wheel and rode it. On and on the madness rolled. Now the world has struggled with itself like a rabid dog with two heads. From many who had much, much has been taken; many who had little, something they have taken—what they say was their own. Oh fiddle! Have you never heard how the Englishmen north of here threw off their King's taxes? Hardly any taxes those petty imposts were, yet those ingrates would have their independence. Oh, before you fled, but of course we never told you, nor any other dependent—of course!

“Yet the war of those English 'gainst their King, this was a war, for he hired good troops and sent them overseas, bright-buttons insulted by their opponents, ragged, dull militias mustered from the poor. Ah, but the rebels' general had fought the sneaking tawnies, and now he sneaked in turn. He hid his shabby paupers behind rocks and trees; they lurked without regard to rules of war. The king's bright chessmen were tumbled in their ranks. Yet still, this sordid rebellion was a *war*.

“But in France no war; naught but carnage and vengeance, lust and rage. They cut off the heads of their betters, then they killed the leaders they themselves had raised from the ranks, snarling and biting, turning on their own, again and again. This was the bitch wheel, turning and turning—with every turn, more heads rolling, the spokes of that wheel knives. The Corsican mounted the wheel of knives and rolled it all over Europe, cutting. And the rumbling wheel of slashing knives was heard across the sea, and your own people then heard they would be free despite their masters' ruin, as if our lives and prosperity counted for naught. Yet Napoleon sent no soldiers to free you! No, indeed, he sent soldiers to clap more irons on your legs, for the revenues of our

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plantations were precious to France. Now she regrets the damned proclamations in the damned assemblies! She regrets the insanity of leveling gone too far! The Corsican were never fool enough to free the sugar hands, whatever the assemblies said—though you would free yourselves, fools, to starve. I suppose I must call you *Citizen*, now, if you have stolen your freedom with the others. I like it not. Yet your general, your Toussaint—I must say, I like him better than spit-curled Bonaparte, whose incompetent soldiers lost our plantation.”

“Bo-na-parte . . . !” I mouthed the name and poked my stubby tongue in it, but knew not its shape. Nor did I know the shape of *Tous-saint*, yet these were the names of men with ideas—men and ideas, the powder and spark that made the gun of revolution fire—men and ideas, the noblest combination that ever were, that I had never known were a weapon but had thought were a kind of light.

“*Man*,” I wrote on my slate, “*Man is Nature’s masterwork. Man alone constitutes a class apart, though one does not descend through an unimaginably vast expanse of space to reach the animals.*”

“Oh, what nonsense you write,” cried the sick man, testily turning his head from side to side. “What nonsense! What nonsense!”

“*I cite the philosopher, Monsieur de Buffon, with embellishment of my own*,” I wrote in my plate of sand.

“Buffon? Ah!” he cried, “The late Intendant of the King’s Garden. Count of the Labyrinth, Duke of the Gazebo, Chevalier of Water Plants, Marquis of Glass Houses, the author of the *Histoire Naturelle*, who died without granting my father right of signature. Fourteen horses and nineteen servants, Citizen, all in livery. Thirty-six choir boys and sixty clerics in lace collars and cuffs. And right behind the funeral procession, the carts rolling down the streets toward the knife. Buffon died in his bed, of stones, but his son, Buffonet, walked up the wooden stairs. Now he had been as profligate as I, Goody, yet on the scaffold he was very brave.

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‘Citizens,’ he said, ‘my name is Buffon,’ and made no excuses. He stuck his neck beneath the blade and did not soil his breeches. So he died in a manner he had not lived. So I too die as I have not lived. Oh, I have wasted myself, wasted, but still I am my father’s son. . . .

“Goody, you may repay my father’s trust. I pray you will shrive me before I die, and attend me with the unction, for you—a faithless runaway—you are the meetest priest in these parts! Keep both my watches”—he patted his empty fobpocket. “Grant what I ask for the sake of our ancient friendship. Grant it in homage to the Master who claims all loyalty. In the name of our Lord and God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I pray you not leave me expire alone, Citizen, croaking as Our Lord for water.”

He did not call me *Citizen* with the degree of conviction he called me *Goody*. Yet more earnest than the conversion to an egalitarian courtesy seemed the conversion of the erstwhile cynic to PIETY. And who is so sinless he would not be afraid to die? I stroked his sparse white hair back from his wrinkled brow. I bathed his forehead and fed him from rinds filled with gruel, which my offspring were bringing from the sea, which surely were the best food in all the world to sustain him, though its fishy smell did make him cough.

“Seeing you take all so calm, and subordinate your advantage to your kindness, I will tell you more of this revolution, which even now is spreading like plague across the world.”

“Do not agitate yourself, Good Sir,” I insisted, though memories did smolder in my breast as the hazy glow on embers that have all but died.

In the clouds that covered and uncovered the moon, I saw Vérité stealing into the smoldering ruins of M’sieu’s library, kneeling in the warm ashes by a bucket she had lugged. She was about to bury

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a doll with feathers through a hole in its heart. Though she had often pricked it with pins, she had snuggled it in the hammock of her pocket, for she knew how much worse a master than Dufay the world could harbor. Now she ignored the triumph all around. She dug a grave, scratching the ash and then the soil, clawing with an unburnt chair leg and shoveling with a half-burnt book. Then she laid the doll to rest in this hole, where no one would find it, and sprinkled on it the ashes of books, and emptied on it her bucket of sea water. Now was the fire extinguished. Now was the spell broken.

"The horror is general," rasped Pamphile. "I do not know what good this revolution has turned up. For I tell you in France the poor are still the poor, though more and more merchants live as landed rich. And still the wretched toil. I tell you, little has changed in the proportionate distribution of privilege. Blood has been shed, that is all."

"And the Anduves?"

"I pray these isles will choke on ash," he gasped. "Do not ask after those who have ruined my father and me. Damn their freedom! Damn 'em, I say, damn 'em."

I resented his MALEDICTION, oh most heartily. Yet now his breath rattled most horribly, so I stifled the heat that rose from my belly. I banked in dried sea-weed the trembling body of Pamphile Maxime Célestin Aubignole Dufay. I covered the weed with sand, the sand with fronds, and did all to keep him warm. Despite my ministrations, his lips were turning blue, his hands a deeper blue. I called my offspring and bade them lie with me on the mound, to warm Pamphile with our bodies' warmth. As if he had been a faltering newborn, we patted his sand-covered feet and crooned encouragement. He did smile as if to bless us; my offspring stroked his face.

"Ah, Goody . . .," he breathed.

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Why did we labor to save him? We creatures treasure life as fire. We cannot bear the losing of a spark, so precious is it. And this were true, be the dying one a worthless profligate, still we cup the flame of his life in our hands, 'gainst the cold wind of death.

Were not Pamphile my enemy? Were not all whites my enemies? They had pressed me and hounded me and kindled my hopes but to douse them again. They had punished and degraded and tortured and wounded my mother and my wife. Yet I held to my bosom this hapless, insolent man, presumptuous and foolish and dying, and listened to his faltering heart, and roused myself to console him.

"Courage, Citizen," I murmured, chafing his cold blue wrists. "Fear not for your soul. But die in peace, you will dwell beneath the sea in the house where wisdom is shared. Knowledge and joy bring bliss, and all souls bask in eternal contemplation of the Gods."

"Night. . . ." whimpered Pamphile, "Night—a candle—look you. . . . 'Tis early but . . . nightfall—I say—I say—you, boy!—a light. . . . Why? . . . Turn down my bed—I say!—'Tis—look you—look you, now, wash . . . . . wash my small-clothes—press 'em—you there! A light, damn you—have you . . . . . ? Black my boots! What? . . . . . the morrow? Tonight, whilst—both wigs—powder and curl my . . . . . look! A candle for't—fallen, already . . . . . and stockings there—mend . . . . . mend—"

I soothed his forehead and sang him my godmothers' lullaby, "Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to."

"'Tis as before. . . ." he murmured.

Leaning so my looming shadow did cut off the sunlight that had suffused and warmed him, I intoned in most sea-like, tide-pulling tones, "Even so. You are returning . . . returning . . . returning. . . ."

And I rocked like the sea, covering and uncovering his light, so he flickered in his own fading, the world spoke to him, and he came a little back to life.

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"Are there—are there women on the other—?"

Struggling up from the cocoon of sand we had banked on him, he raised himself onto his elbows with a difficulty that rattled his breath in his chest.

"Fancy women?" he rasped. "Full-bloods?"

Oh, then gorge rose. Then my heart cried out for the memory of my poor Pélérine, my Vérité, whose thin, broken fingers had lain so sweetly in mine—*terreur, terreur*, my own.

"And what would you do with a full-blooded woman?" I whispered cold as the bottom of the sea in his ear.

"Oh, be she very black—very hot—revive me . . .," he gasped.

His round, wild eyes looked straight through mine, as if he saw past my heart. There counted for naught the man who cradled in careful hands the tiny flame of his wretched life. Was I no more than a beast, that felt not slights? And my sisters? Were they beasts? Raw and dumb? Created for the service of Pamphile? All the seas that had washed him had not softened his heart. A stone is more subject to the action of waves than the flint in the breast of Pamphile to the action of pity. I gritted my teeth. Again I brushed the sand from his face and sang again the dear old song, "Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to." Even as a hawk falls on a mouse, shadow first, I lowered my palm on his face to stop his talk for good. Yes, I MURDERED him. I killed him for Uncle, in the name of all I had missed. I killed him for Vérité, for *La Terreur*. I killed him for Juba. I killed him. And my fishy progeny, though they knew him not, gave up a wailing of grief, an unceasing ululation, a frightful whistling and piscine howling.

Now there is an intimacy in water, which moves so palpably on the skin, ferocity be lissome under-sea. The ruthless shark; the vicious, flapping skate; the monstrous, fountainy whale; the fire-breathing worm that eats all these others, yet barely ruffles the tides with hundreds of paws—even at the prospect of these

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ruthless beasts, my sons but shrug. For water is ever in motion, there are many oysters clutched in the fingers of the reef, and every creature kills to eat. Yet only to eat!

When I said, "I murdered Pamphile because he was white, and looked past my heart," my offspring eyed me as one who has lost his wits.

"He slandered my wife," I explained, "and defamed my sisters with vile insinuations." They but howled until they were distracted by a run of fishlets, which they dove to catch.

I saw them not for a full procession of the moon's faces. My offspring shunned me as a reprobate who had taken life in vain and left it to the consorts to bring my food. Yet I did not regret what I had done. I claimed my deed. Mine and mine again! Mine the grief, mine the transgression, and mine the sweet revenge. Pamphile was not smooth in the groin as a pennywooden doll, his sex in his mouth and that a female's generative organ—no, Pamphile had been a human male, born from a belly, who poured his seed from the spout where he pissed. Of all the creatures in my purview, only the man whose end I had hastened had come into being as I had come and was shaped like me. I ignored my fishy progeny, who did not know passion. I cradled Pamphile in my arms, singing in his cold, stiff ear, "Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to," which I have always known means "Death to whites."

Now I was part of the REBELLION, though I had killed with my hand. The insurgents in France had fought, said Pamphile, with knives—strong blades, like those of the bills that cut the cane. Sugar knives to cut sugar lords who wore sugar shirts and pickled themselves in sugar-fire drink. Had their chopped-off sugar heads been baked in sugar pies? How many heads? How many pies? The wheel of knives had not stopped rolling and cutting, rolling and cutting, so Pamphile had sworn. The blades cut then turned to cut those who had cut before. Did they never stop?

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Pamphile had spoken of black generals, viz., some men placed higher in the rebellious ranks than others. And did lowlier men roll out the wheel to cut down those? Did brothers shove each other from the high bed and the long table?

Piffle of whey-guts! We who had suffered together so much grief would not cut each other down for profit or gain. No humans were ever as communal as my fishy offspring, who know not rivalry or lust, yet we bondsmen have lived as helpmeets, in reverence of Deities and with respect for living and dead. Yet if crops and stores, docks and boats had been burned, mill-house and curing-house and kitchen-house, if all by which men gain a livelihood were ash, then how could men continue to thrive in the Anduves? Would help come from far-off Guinée? Oh, Pierre must go to the people, offering his strong hands and back and his mind of a savant, to help them rebuild all, better than before, but for our own benefit. If we succeed not? If the citizens of the new polity founder, yea, if we starve, as Pamphile predicted, then we would starve together.

All men must die. I would die free, among friends, near their fires. I would not die like the wretched Pamphile, stifled by his only mourner, who loathes him. Now my offspring had abandoned me, who would arrange my body in posture of sleep on its raft, who place the stones on my eye-lids and sprinkle them with dust? Who would intone a dirge as the bark is shoved out to sea? Who weep? What circling mourners sing songs of lamentation, standing waist-high in the sea, their wet smocks billowing around them? Let me die among mourners cooking skillet pie with the grief around the fires, let me die among mourners who mount a night-long vigil, with chants and processions, oh let me not die alone as Pamphile! I pitied him now. I would grant him decent rites in the manner of his people, lest, when my time come, I be punished by Baron Skull for a transgression worse than murder.

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Before I bury him I would relate the tale of Pamphile's most unlooked-for ILLUMINATION. In saving his tale from oblivion I weave my thread into the same cloth as his, yet though I murdered him. I trust his tale to the same prospect for redemption to which I trust my own, to you, Kind Reader. So we are all tipped off our rafts into the maw beneath the tides of Time.

Now the raft the girl pushed into the outgoing tide, the raft on which the escaping father and son lay stretched—this raft floated who knows how long, Pamphile lying atop his father and gripping his ribs. Awake and asleep, they floated together, as flies copulating, toward they knew not what destiny, only to be separated by the waves of a storm that suddenly rose. The father slid off the o'eturned raft and under the waves; Pamphile righted the raft and climbed back aboard with the grimmest determination, he who had not known a fixed ambition in his life. When the storm subsided, still he clung to his raft with a desperation that bleached his knuckles, the sun pummeling his wits, his thirst-numbered tongue swelling in his mouth. The winking mirrors of the waters mocked his thirst, the witless flashes of waves burning spots on his eyelids when he had closed his eyes.

Yet, upon opening his eyes in the velvet dark, he discovered himself surrounded by gentler lights, further away. He feared the rebels had come for him. He feared the tawnies & maroons. Then he thought the turtles his father had loosed in his garden, with candles on their backs, had come to light his way through the maze of the sea. There were no turtles. The lights, he saw, were not the flames of candles but were themselves creatures, each a single, silvery orb, like the eye of a fish, yet translucent, opalescent, like the fish's scales, each orb reflecting in its depth the encompassing, starry vault above.

The solitary eyes were drawn to one another, to mingle some underwater dangling parts. They pulled each other beneath the

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water's skin, where a force, peradventure the weight of darkness, shattered them. Thereupon each shard rose an exact miniature of its parent, a smaller eye already reflecting in its roundness the heavens' starry vault. And when Pamphile covered one of the eyes, floating near him, with his own cupped hand, then withdrew his hand, he saw written on the eye, "as veins on the membrane of a moth wing," the lines of his own palm that he had often scrutinized, for a parlor game, to see his destiny. His reflected fate in the creature's eye was now superimposed on the reflected heavens.

Curiously, he splashed the water to propel an eye creature as yet unimpressed with his fate toward one that had been marked with his palm print, "like a specter, or memory." Brought thus together, the two did shudder and shatter. Each of the young bursting up from the wreck of fragmented parents now bore the impression of Pamphile's hand superimposed upon the heavens. And he told himself he was a fine fellow, to have left his mark on the heavens as a brand on kine!

He branded all he could reach. For a while the creatures drifted around him, an illusion of omnipotence. Yet they exuded a powerful odor of fish. Pamphile's hunger and thirst become very great, he picked up several of the eyes he had marked as his and ate them, dangling roots and all. Thereupon his field of vision exploded in splinters of light, as if he himself had been a shattering eye.

He saw in that state much that he could not have known: the smoke rising from the fresh-snuffed candle by his parents' bed; the lace his mother had crocheted on the pillow slip, his father's spectacles, earpieces crossed, on the table. Through his parents' eyes, he saw the dull-gloss pewter of a basin and a ewer, saw an etching of a stag and a virgin and others of the city of Paris and the village of Montbard. There were excellent engravings of his father's father's time, principally of tulips, the variety named

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Viceroy; another not named, black as the swan of Juvenal; and the Semper Augustus, that a sailor filched and ate off the counter of a trader, supposing it an onion, out of place among the cut velvets and the water silks. There were proofs of plates for Buffon's *Histoire*, engravings from M'sieu's drawings of bright-eyed fauna, perfect-feathered birds. Pamphile read some words of galleys his father proofed, Buffon's description of desert, terrifying and complete, barren amplitude. Then darkness.

He felt his mother's breast, a cool rose-painted cup beneath his hand. Petals opened, pollen spread down her belly, a mouth between her legs gaped and puckered like a jellyfish sucking in food. A finger moved between his legs, feeding the mouth like a tongue, moving in the dark throat as if to speak, and she cried out or he did.

Pamphile walked from his mother's bed and read with his father Buffon's account of THE SEVEN EPOCHS OF NATURE, seeing all as if he had been present: In The First Epoch, a comet strikes the sun. Fiery molten matter is spun off to become the planets. In The Second, the liquid fire spins and spins and spins and cools into spheres, which wrinkle and hollow and blister as they further cool. The Third Epoch: steam cooling in drops, the drops falling on earth as rain, the rain flooding the planet with a very hot and steamy sea. The giant shellfish congeal in the deep. It is The Fourth Epoch now—quakes and shakes beneath the weight of the waters. The shellfish are shedding their shells to form the calcareous rocks. By The Fifth Epoch, the terrestrial beasts are born from the cooling folds of the wrinkling earth as words are born from the alphabet. They form in the north, where the evaporation of heat is greatest. Elephants, hippopotami, rhinoceroses, leopards, horses, bison and, yes, men. In The Sixth Epoch, they walk toward the equator, following the warmth, for the planet chills from the poles. And the further the beasts

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walk from their birthplace, the smaller and more degenerate they become, viz., the elephant loses his hair and his tusks grow shorter—

“Damnation!” cried Pamphile in my arms. “Eyes or no eyes, I cannot sort these epochs out. The earth is cooling off. Some day all will be dark and cold. We are now in The Seventh Epoch, the epoch of man’s dominion over the other animals, whom we so vastly excel. We must use our talents, not only to further our own ambitions, but to prolong the duration of life on earth. We must dwell in considerable numbers and burn the cold, gloomy forests. We must keep our stables and barns full of horses & cows & other manner of domesticated creatures that take cold air into their bodies and blow out hot, like great bellows blowing up the fire of a forge. Thus we will slow down the cooling of the earth. Cold! I am cold. Rose?” cried Pamphile in my arms. “Mama? Rose?”

Pamphile afloat among the eyes awoke to sun, the light-wrinkled water, the taste of fish in his mouth. Still he looked at the world as through a veil, thin and spectral, impressed with the image of the star-studded vault, impressed with the lines of his palm. Still his fate was written large as all Creation in the stars. By the time I held him and heard him, his vision, he said, had cleared. Yet not long after, his eyes had clouded with the final knowledge, the shadow of my hand descending ahead of his future.

Holding his stiffening body in my arms, I crooned his name, “Pamphile, Pamphile.” Then I threw his body from me. I thought I had heard a silky voice in my ear, Pierre Baptiste! A sweet voice, a sugar voice, dripping poison: Eat the eyes! Eat the eyes! said the voice. Scoop out and swallow Pamphile’s eyes. While still they are firm in his face, enjoy sweet knowledge. Eat the eyes!

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So stroll with Pamphile through the yard on Dufay's estate, espy poor Beloo, staring at his fingerless hands, as if they were starfish that had scuttled from the sea to batten onto his wrists. Drawn by the fragrance of boiling chicken, peek into the kitchen. My wife with her skirt tucked above her apron mixes a posset of wine with cinnamon to restore to M'sieu his vigor.

"Vérité! Some posset for Pierre growing old without you."

She does not hear.

Pierre, if you would be heard, eat the eyes!

Jean-François has brought into the yard the boots he has collected. He sets them on the ground and looks around for the boys he would set to blacking them. They are hiding. Only a little white girl pulling the pigtails of two dark girls careful not to retaliate, lest they be beaten. She has a sickly look, very blue. She will not live, but will join her siblings in the line of little graves. And one of the dark girls too will die young and be sent out to sea on a little raft, the candles blinking in the wind. Who is watching the girls? Why Quasheba! Is Rose then dead? Yes, Rose is dead, and Granny Nancy. And Jean-François walks stooped over and has very white hair. Quasheba and Dido and a new man named Vergil pull their stools to the fire. Vergil is boiler now, the favorite of Squint, yet righteous and bold, a captain the hands would choose for themselves. What stories will he tell? Vergil, before you were taken from Guinée, did you meet the Fombé people who wear on their breasts certain pouches woven in a pattern of dark and light bands? Alas, Pierre, you must eat the eyes if you would have him speak. Eat the eyes if you would have his tale for the shadow his-toire. Eat the eyes!

Walk with Pamphile in Buffon's gardens, following along the allées the savant who paces, mumbling, mumbling. Now he pauses to dictate to the scribbling secretary who breaks the points of his pens, splashing ink on the pages. The wind rises; the pages drift across the parterres from the campaign table set in a pergola.

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Buffon declaims with such force the words strike petals from the roses.

Buffon pauses, wipes his brow, and claps on his head the hat he has carried under his arm, though it will not settle, so great is the frizzed-up volume of his wig. He holds the hat to his head with one hand, to keep the sun from his eyes with its brim. With his other hand he waves the air tenderly. He mutters and shakes his head. His hat falls to the ground. Now, Pierre. Pick up the hat. Speak.

Pierre will hand Buffon his hat. When Buffon's eyes, as blue and as cloudy as marbles, settle on Pierre—Pierre will look straight into those eyes. He will speak of his shadow histoire. Alas, he cannot hear. To be heard, you must eat the eyes. Pamphile's eyes. Buffon's eyes. Eat the eyes! Then hear Buffon dilate on The Seven Epochs of Nature. You will astonish him with your discovery of an Eighth. You will walk with him, talking all the while, along the allées, if only you eat the eyes. Eat the eyes. Buffon's eyes, Pamphile's eyes. Why not?

Were it not meet I should pluck my truth from a white man's skull, even as, long ago, Pamphile had plucked my bag from Rose's hand, stealing what little I had from my mother? What had a murderer to lose and what to gain in scrupling niceties? Why not eat the eyes before they rotted to slime or were pecked to pulp by birds?

Yet rocking in my arms the corpse of feckless Pamphile, sensing his soul depart his body with his warmth, I could not defile his flesh. What? To hear ever after the silent hooves of the Baron Skull's horses, Mist and Dread? Cursed by my own lights and Heaven's, which I could see well enough without devouring eyes? No, I could not disfigure the face of my brother, my enemy, the man I had killed whom I held in my arms. I was not the ANTHROPOPHAGUS! I was a man of resolve. I buried him whole in the manner of his people.

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Digging with clam shells, I excavated a pit and rolled him in. I was covering him with loam, up to the height of the surrounding terrain, as was the custom of whites, and sweating to do it. While I was working, there fell on me a shadow. Alarmed, I looked up into the face of my smallest child, twisted Léo. With his tiny ear my Léo had heard, he said, the spider, who had not spoken since she delivered my offspring from the branding iron. Now she demanded, he said, other obsequies for Pamphile than I had commenced.

"What?" I did most bitterly protest. My labor for naught? The corpse was covered with dirt.

"Throw rinds," said Léo. "The spider said Uncle would speak."

"The matter is between me and this dead man. It is not for sprites and deities. Get on with your fishing."

"You have said it yourself. Bad men weight down with earth the dead, or immure them in vaults of rock, confining to torture, preventing return to sea. Why do you wish to be bad?"

I threw up my hands.

"Throw rinds, Papamam. Very most please consider."

What could I do?

The rinds fell *shaggy, smooth, smooth, shaggy*. Spider whispered in Léo's ear. Léo picked up a clam shell. Together we tossed clam's-shellfuls of dirt back off the fly-blown corpse. Then we must hack at the vines that o'ergrew the two-tub boat. *Shaggy, smooth, smooth, shaggy*. So swore the rinds. So Uncle directed me to employ as a funeral barge my cherished boat. Yet I did not immediately acquiesce.

"This vile scapegrace?" I cried. "This abomination & perversion? In Pierre's boat? Which was built to take the cyclopedish histoire to the seat of the savants? This boat, now the only means of return to the Anduves, my home? Where not only the instruments of the masters' cruelty, viz., Four-Post and Stinger, have been burned, but the houses and crops and sheds, the cooper's and carpenter's

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shops, the kitchen? Now in the new republic of free men there be need to design manufactories and found schools. Surely, there be need for ingenious savants, with knowledge of ledgers and accounts, who know shipbuilding and navigation and can draft letters to eminent men, in a fair hand, to further the conduct of diplomacy! How can we journey to the isle of need but in this very boat which you propose to waste on this damn-dead bloat-bag!"

"Many good place for fish-catch, different year-time," said Léo.

"Damn me!" did I hotly cry. "You fish can sustain your living anywhere in the sea. Whereas men—civil men—have fixed abodes. They must make their fortunes where they live, or be made by them. Now that I will not be caught and hurt, I must return to my wife!"

"Uncle claim," said Léo, pointing to the tiny ear that heard the spider. He gave a spritely shrug. "Uncle want Pamphile rest in boat."

What could I do? I had given myself to Uncle, long, long ago. I had dedicated my life to His rites and His service; He had not forsaken this otherwise God-forsaken isle. I could not refuse Him. Though I did not believe there remained to me sufficient lifetime to gather drift for another boat, I picked up my hack-piece. I commenced to uncover the boat. In it, Pamphile might arrive in France, to have his high-born head chopped off. Was this justice? Water is ironic; she changes her mind.

"We must send him off to sea with gifts," said Léo. "We must pray the sea be kind."

Though I rued the day I had taught my young to divine with coco rinds, I was glad to have Léo back! I would have undertaken all that Uncle required, yet I was prevented by the condition of the boat, which proved to have rotted from beneath. When we lifted it from its resting place, it fell to pieces.

Spider then spoke again in Léo's tiny ear. She bade him clamber to the top of a very large rock, the highest point on our isle.

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There he threw the rinds again. *Shaggy, smooth, shaggy, smooth.* Spider spoke long into Léo's ear. He was advised we must burn the body in the boat remains, though the damp, rotten wood make difficulties in kindling and sustaining fire. We dragged what drift-wood I had collected since My Temptation. With dried fronds and beach grass we built a PYRE, having cleared a ring of earth around it so the fire would not spread and drive us into the sea. And once again Pierre frothed sticks.

We laid the bloaty blue Pamphile across the crumbling tubs, and we covered him with brush, filling the tubs beneath him as well. Before we fired him, I again sprinkled sand on the stones that weighed down his lids. I murmured again the words that I had heard from the mouth of Père Gouy. "Dust to dust!"

Yet the honor I owed his body I did not owe his clothes. That sprinkle of dust were his funeral suit! Before I burned him, I stripped off his rags, that I might dry them, and lay them as patterns against palm-fiber stuff I wove, as of old my sails; so he gave me, in death as never in life, a new suit of clothes. *The savants are dead! Long live the savants!* I wove a suit for Léo too. As my other progeny forgave me one by one, I wove each a suit.

Then I commenced making PAPER of palm fibers, rotted in solution of stink-fruit and fish-gruel. Later my offspring devised a method of separating the fibers with their teeth—very fine & excellent for paper. We make thin, strong, exquisite stuff, which we pound to a smooth surface, meet for writing.

My shadow grows shorter with each new day now. Drawing to a close my chronicle, I desire to append a brief account of the return of my TALISMAN, which did wash up on shore one day, unexpected and unbidden, the pouch much rotted by the sea, its contents entirely vanished, but the tattered bag still possessed of a power to quiet my heart.

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Never had I known the true significance or provenance of the lizard's tongue & cumin seed, cinnamon sticks & flower petals my mother had collected. And my godmothers' proverbs, and the shapely phrases I culled from books—could these have represented Wisdom, scrawled on the obverse of tea labels? It were fitting the pouch be empty, yet no less painful a grief.

In the cisterns where I had been wont to see Vérité, I did sometimes see the faces of children—human children—strangers to me, bright and black, plump and hale, with sparks of quickness in their eyes. Even as Pierre's fishy offspring are the children of his mouth, these cistern-young are the CHILDREN OF THE ANDUVES, born in freedom. I pray they will be schooled in letters and ciphers, but if the library were burned, I fear they will not. Alas, I cannot see in the cistern whether they have learned some useful trade, and cowries and coco shells tell not.

Surely the Anduvean children will live more prosperous and peaceful if each among them have a patent to trade on in the world. Would it not be the highest calling for a savant, to furnish them with the wherewithal to bring the world in trade to their door? With what patent would I furnish the Anduves?

The manufacture of paper from fibers of palm, rotted in stink-fruit and fish gruel, cannot be exported, for the stink fruit grow but on this isle and the gruel be fermented in the mouths of fish sprites without propensity to settled industry. Pierre would impart the secret of ORCHID-POLLEN SALVE, how it may be rubbed on the skin to ward off insects, moreover how the rubbing imparts to the rubbed parts a golden glow. This would be pleasing on the flesh of men and women, and most especially might be pleasing if smeared in rings around the eyes of the latter. Pierre would demonstrate the mixing of the pollen with jelly of pounded uglimousse fish, to make a paste, which can be packed into coco

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shells, and sold or traded for all manner of necessities, corn & barreled beef & ax-heads & cloth. What do you say, oh cistern children?

The children respond not, but pensively gaze from the water of the cistern, as if they would study and learn the world. Oh, these children would not have burned M'sieu's books! Perhaps there were saved out a few, and the paintings of M'sieu—kept in a safe trunk in a safe place. It is the dominion of masters, not their art or philosophy, bonded men find their freedom against.

Daily I circumambulate our isle, spying what drift I can pull ashore. Yet I believe that all I will leave the sons of the Anduves, and their sons, yea, and daughters too (strong, comely girls, surely) be the CYCLOPEDISH HISTOIRE in the writing down of which the fishy progeny now assist. I leave the histoire for the Anduveans, then, and for whoever find it.

Sometimes reflected in the cisterns, I see my own withering countenance and ask myself how my derelict's life has gone. I answer me thus: by my own cleverness have I transported myself to a station higher than that to which I was born. None other than I, methinks, has undergone my transformation. In the realm of philosophy, the children of my mouth have gone beyond me; in the realm of discovery their accomplishments are greater than Quassi's (and his were great enough), greater even than Buffon's. Yet it is I and I alone who have discovered THE EIGHTH EPOCH, for Buffon did not see beyond The Seventh. He did not foresee an epoch when man must acknowledge the end of his dominion over other creatures, even as, come the Revolution, some men have had to give up their dominion over others.

Now, if Pamphile were a credible witness, M. de Buffon came to believe that the cooling of the earth can only be slowed by the industry of men, settled in numbers. Small wonder a man who

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operated forges did believe such manufactories could prolong the duration of life on the cooling cinder of Earth. Do we also increase the longevity of the planet by boiling sugar in vats that men fall in to drown? If this be true, then let the planet slowly die, while the men on it live happily, with neither sugar nor slavery.

Yet if, in The Eighth Epoch, men learn to dwell as one family with all other creatures, then we shall have a new *histoire* to write together, more compendious than any conceived before. From the honest labor of this conception will be born forms of language and thought, and thus of life, that were not present in the rock and fire of Creation. This Pierre believes. For, after much reflection, he does not hold with the Christians, that all that may be, already is. Rather he submits, all that may be is not yet born. Thus, there can be no death of the planet, for it continues to give birth. If a man dies, and his children live, and their children, can the lineage of the man be dead? And this is true, even if his children's children are living far from the land of their origin. And it is true, even if a man's children are philoso-fish.

Yet I do divagate, wandering far from my course. No one has asserted that the death of all life on the planet be imminent. I, who have seen my wizened countenance reflected in the cistern, will sooner see the end of my own life approach. So I have begun to consider my contribution to the sum of knowledge in the world, whether it be small or great. One question does remain in my mind: will I be granted, before my time runs out, reunion with my wife? Much the spider will whisper in Léo's tiny ear, but nothing of Pierre's voyage home. For comfort I have the remains of her quilt; I sleep with the rags in my nest.

Like other men, I must be as content with what I do not know and cannot have as with what I know and have. Truly, a power lies in having NOT and knowing NOT, by which I intend no willful, base, and indulgent ignorance, but a tranquil reverence that enters the heart as a murmur from a departed mollusk's shell. What

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we cannot know reaches out of the dark to eat our tongues and bring forth life.

I tell you, the power of NOT has risen in me to help o'erthrow the habit of being catered for—preposterous grub queen! After the death of Pamphile, I no longer wished to be fed the vomited gruel, like a bird-babe in its nest. Marie Mandilé-Ba had given me, not gruel, but a hook carved of bone; once again I would pierce the mouths of fin-meat.

I will set down the manner of my FISHING. First, I tease a number of hairs from my plaits, which long-armed Framo has braided. I twist these hairs to twine, knot the hook to them, impale on the hook a palmetto bug, and troll from the promontory whence so long ago I impaled Amie on my turtling spear.

In the swath the consorts cut around my hook, I lower and raise the bug in the sun-shafted waters until dinner rises to the bait. I cut the gill-luffing head from the flopping body. I bow to Uncle before I grill, and leave Him half the fish, and eat all my part but the head and bones, so my offspring will see this were no gratuitous murder.

Oh, the fragrance of flotsam fire, upon which I have thrown diverse & fragrant herbs! Oh the succulence of stick-grilled fish flesh, eaten from the skin! After my meal, I burn the hairs that had served as my line and throw the bones and the head to the sea. The hook I return to my ear, for my relict pouch cannot contain it. So I feed myself.

Émlo, the first to compose a trope, has asked that I say more of my hairs, which are useful not only for fishing. For when Framo plaits them, he strings on them the cowrie shells where spiders dwell so tiny no eye can see them nor even the tiny ear of Léo hear. And these shells speak through their mouths, which speak through my hairs to my heart. Thus am I able to scribe the words

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you read, my powers sufficient to the task if a number of the cowries be mounded at the end of each of my plaits, to hold my soul to earth awhile. For I am very old. My hairs are very white. My soul yearns to fly to Chenwiyi's lap.

Émlo begs me to stay awhile, to bear witness to the customs and beliefs of this isle.

"If we are The Eighth Epoch," he says, "you must write us down."

"After me—you, my Émlo."

"You know founding. Very much please, say what no other know, so we dream who we."

"And what of the Sea-Ones? Who will tell Their story?"

"Dark," he says. "Very dark way down."

"I would shed light."

"Waste not powers, Papamam. Lest Eighth Epoch be tissue scar, very much please consider."

Having ground to a powder the gritty ash that had been Pamphile, having mixed the powder with squid's ink, yea, verily, I, Pierre, commenced to write these pages, calling on the shards of memory, unite and be whole. From burned bones, shadow his-toire. And so I too give the wheel another turn.

Though I hastened Pamphile's end, his arrival inspired in me the hope our island might one day be discovered by other men, yea, and women. In The Eighth Epoch, human souls will profit by my reflections even as my fish-sprite progeny do. And our reflections will continue, light on light in the dark. I have given each of my offspring the bone-fire ink. We have copied onto our coats the pattern of light & dark bands that was woven into the relict pouch. The pattern will be preserved when the talisman crumbles to dust.

After I have gone, my offspring will fend for themselves. And what have I given them? The simple righteousness I learned from Rose in the yard? Savantish subtlety? What profit these by

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immersion in sea water? Still, I count my offspring, and their offspring, as civil as any other creatures, notwithstanding MAN, who presumes himself the nonpareil. To the Anduves I would say: learn from the philoso-fish. To savants who still have their heads: Man is separated from other creatures but by a crack. In The Eighth Epoch, the crack will be mended, the universe Man has broken be made whole. If this be blasphemy, may the Gods & Their Parents & Their Parents, all the way back to Grandmother Emptiness, forgive me my trespass.

Through the clouds reflected in the cistern, I see my *Pélérine*, who comes in her ship of sugar threads, gossamer on the light. It is manned by hundreds of spiders, golden-bellied, crimson-legged, opal-eyed, amethyst-tongued. Yes . . . through gold and purple light glides the *PÉLÉRINE*, a ship that needs but one great sail, that spreads so high the top is lost in clouds. Through a porthole that looks like a silver eye I see in the belly of the ship the prism conjure house, with all its crystal rooms & chests intact, its facets reflecting dreams of the denizens of air & land & sea—the true, universal cyclopedish histoire.

And this ship with its payload of conjure histoire is stopping at all the isles of the Anduves. Pierre takes on board all his friends, whether they be in high place or low. The *Pélérine* sails again, this time for Guinée, stopping always at each island where sugar is grown, or any other commodity, and men & women are slaves to Toil, even if they are called Free. In the rigging, the spider sailors, neat and pretty in their footing, keep their eyes alert for cast-aways. If they spy one, they pull him up, on a hawser of sugar. And there is room in the hold for all his conjure. All the sufferers sail with Pierre in his ship to Guinée, and each is united with his own lineage, and marries well, and prospers in his garden beneath his orange tree, and achieves full measure of honor and wisdom, and has two changes of linen a week and all the books he can read,

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and learns the true name that his mother has placed in his talisman pouch. The girl Vérité waits in Guinée for Pierre, her eyes bright and gay, her cheeks round. Her step is lively and even. Her arms are held out to Pierre; a tender, joyous smile curves her perfect lips. I go now. Iroson. It is time.

The humble servant  
of my children, may  
they thrive and increase,

Pierre, Mère et Père,  
Premier, Dernière, yes,

AMEN

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PATRICIA EAKINS is the author of *The Hungry Girls and Other Stories*, which was hailed by the *New York Times Book Review* as a “work of imaginative brilliance” and by *Hungry Mind Review* as “an astonishingly ambitious and accomplished book.” Eakins’s prose has been published in *Transgressions: The Iowa Anthology of Innovative Fiction*, *Parnassus*, *Fiction International*, *Conjunctions*, *Storia*, *Hot-wired*, and *Race Traitor: The Journal of the New Abolitionists*. She has received two literature fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and was awarded the 1996 Aga Khan Prize for Fiction from the *Paris Review*. Her web site is <http://www.fabulara.com>.