

Selected Short Fiction of

Déwé Gorodé

THE KANAK APPLE SEASON



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

Peter Brown

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PANDANUS BOOKS

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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For Pwiaa Laura Nâbai
Who brought me into the world

For Téâ Nâbèènô
You will have no hatred in your heart, my son
‘Then what? Then what, father?’
‘You will have a clear head
And a strong back.’

Malick Fall

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Introduction

New Caledonia is a French territory¹ in the south-west Pacific, part of the Melanesian archipelago,² more than 1,000 kilometres east of Australia and 20,000 kilometres from Europe. It is made up of the Mainland (*Grande Terre*), whose principal city, Noumea, is also the territory's capital, and its 'natural extensions' in the shape of neighbouring islands, most notable among which is the Loyalty group of Lifou, Maré, Ouvéa and the tiny Tiga.³

New Caledonia is today characterised by considerable ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. French is the 'national' language, but 28 Melanesian or Kanak⁴ languages are also spoken there, as well as Wallisian by a substantial minority of the population, and the island's finely balanced demography⁵ has given rise to social and political tension over the years, as well as more recently providing the basis for projecting a future multicultural state.⁶ Nearly 90 per cent of New Caledonia's 200,000 inhabitants live on the *Grande Terre*, with the advancing urbanisation of recent years resulting in the growth of greater Noumea to the point where it is now home to nearly two-thirds of the entire population of the territory.

Historical Background

Austronesian migrations from South-East Asia first populated the island, establishing what has come to be known as the Lapita⁷ culture, some 3,000 years before it became known to Europeans when Captain James Cook sailed there in 1774.⁸ After this voyage, French navigators, in particular d'Entrecasteaux (1792) and Dumont d'Urville (1827, 1840), further explored the islands of New Caledonia. Whalers, sandalwood traders and beachcombers followed, and English

and French missionaries were active from 1840, facilitating European settlement, although the Catholic Marist missions set up on the north-east coast of the mainland met with hostility, and the Balade mission had to be temporarily abandoned in 1847. Annexed by France in 1853, New Caledonia became a penal colony in the second half of the 19th century, receiving more than 20,000 convicts (*transportés*) banished from the Metropole between 1864 and 1897. More than 4,000 political prisoners (*déportés*) were also exiled there after the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871.⁹ Under the *régime de l'Indigénat* of colonial rule, the indigenous Melanesians, whose culture is based on their relationship to the land, were resettled on reserves, often far removed from their original homes. A poll tax was levied on them and they had to work as indentured labourers. Against this background, significant and violent uprisings took place, particularly in 1878 and 1917.¹⁰

The French Fourth Republic repealed the *régime de l'Indigénat* in 1946, making the Kanaks French citizens, while the colony of New Caledonia evolved into a *Territoire d'Outre-Mer*. After the constitutional reforms proposed by the *loi-cadre* (Defferre framework law) of 1956, the territory received a certain degree of autonomy, but in the 1958 referendum in France's overseas possessions, 98 per cent of voters in New Caledonia voted against independence. By about 1960, demographic change had resulted in a redistribution of the relative size of the various ethnic communities, with the indigenous Melanesians becoming a minority for the first time and, in 1963, Paris abrogated the *loi-cadre* and resumed central control of New Caledonia's affairs. The demographic change was then accentuated by French government policy, which encouraged an influx of migrants to the territory, particularly during the mining boom of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when there was great demand for nickel. New Caledonia is one

of the world's leading nickel producers, sales of the ore accounting for about 90 per cent of its export revenue.

The 1970s saw the beginnings of the independence movement, as campaigns were launched for the redistribution of land. These campaigns were led by a new generation of Melanesians, some of whom had been students in Paris in the 1960s and had seen at first hand the political force of social movements. In this context, successive governments in France proposed a variety of plans for the future of the island, ranging from a continuation of the status quo to the possibility of independence. In 1975, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the ex-priest turned social activist on the way to becoming leader of the independence movement, organised the cultural festival, 'Melanesia 2000', held on the outskirts of Noumea near the site of the Cultural Centre that now bears his name, at which the question of 'Kanak identity' came into the public arena for the first time.¹¹

The next decade witnessed sharpening divisions between the communities of New Caledonia, often leading to violent confrontation, calls for independence with the establishment in 1984 of the FLNKS (*Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste*) and, at the international level, tension between France and regional powers. These strife-ridden years, known euphemistically as '*les événements*'¹² (1984–88), came to a head in April 1988 with the hostage-taking of 27 gendarmes (four of whom were killed) by Kanak militants on the Loyalty island of Lifou, and the subsequent deaths of 19 of the militants and three soldiers when the French army laid siege to their hiding place in a cave shortly before the French presidential elections that year.¹³

A political compromise was necessary and this was achieved with the signing, in June 1988, of the Matignon Accords, which were negotiated by the French Prime Minister,

Michel Rocard, and the leaders of the two main communities in the Territory, Jean-Marie Tjibaou (pro-independence FLNKS) and Jacques Lafleur (anti-independence RPCR: *Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République*).¹⁴ The Matignon Accords restored social peace by establishing a constitutional framework within which to debate the territory's future. They also divided New Caledonia into three provinces (the Kanak-controlled North and Loyalty Islands, and the European South) in a stated attempt at social and political 'rééquilibrage' (rebalancing). Furthermore, they created the ADCK (*Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak*) as part of their promotion of the Kanak cultural heritage. The ADCK has, since 1998, been housed in the Centre Culturel Tjibaou, constructed as the last of the *grands travaux* (major works) of the presidency of François Mitterrand.

Despite the assassination of Jean-Marie Tjibaou by a fellow Kanak in 1989, the Matignon Accords held and, with French development money flooding into the territory, a kind of uneasy social peace prevailed in a makeshift present, enabling some social and cultural redefinitions, as the difficult past and still uncertain future found themselves placed in parentheses. New Caledonia had given itself 10 years before a referendum on its constitutional future was scheduled to take place in 1998. In the event, the referendum held on 8 November of that year was not about 'independence' as such, but rather ratified the Noumea Accord signed the preceding 5th May, the day after the inauguration of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre. This accord provided for a devolution of certain state powers in the next 15 years (notably in the fields of education, employment and immigration), increased recognition of indigenous culture and a greater integration of the territory into its regional context. It also anticipates a further referendum on independence, as early as 2013 if the New Caledonian *Congrès*

so decides, and by 2018 at the latest.¹⁵ The accord document is preceded by an important preamble in which the French State recognises the ‘shadows’ cast by colonisation and the impact that this has had on Kanak culture. Accordingly, an undertaking is given in the document to promote the latter, for example, through the development of Kanak language and cultural awareness programs in schools.

Literary History

The oral tradition of the indigenous Melanesians of New Caledonia includes a number of different literary genres, which range from origin narratives and the epic and lyric, through to humourous and playful language games.¹⁶ The Paicî linguistic area from which Déwé Gorodé comes has had a particularly strong tradition in this regard. By definition, however, there is no written trace of this literature from pre-colonial times. Indeed, little ‘literary’ work was written at all about New Caledonia until the late-19th century, although a number of *récits de voyage* featuring the island had begun to appear from the end of the 18th century, such as the account by La Billardière of d’Entrecasteaux’s expedition. In the next century, adventurers such as the engineer, Jules Garnier (*La Nouvelle-Calédonie, côte orientale*, 1871), and others recorded their impressions of the area in writing. The *Communarde*, Louise Michel, was the most notable among the convict population to write about the island that was her imposed ‘home’ for eight years after 1873. In works such as *Légendes et chansons de gestes canaques* (1875 and 1885), she explores the world of her fellow convicts and that of the indigenous Melanesians, making use of a number of their legends, with a view to renewing conventional understandings of civilisation.

Another writer of the period, the former *Député* and opponent of Napoleon III, Henri Rochefort, left a novel, *L’Evadé: Roman canaque* (1880), which is, despite its title, an

account of a successful escape by a political *déporté* from the same Noumean penal colony. On the settler side, Marc Le Goupils's *Comment on cesse d'être colon: Six années en Calédonie* (1910) retraces some of the difficulties encountered by newcomers in the confined social space of colonial life — a literary tradition that continued at least until the 1980s with, for example, Marie-France Pisier's novel, *Le Bal du Gouverneur* (1984), on growing up in New Caledonia at the end of the Fourth Republic. Paul Bloc, whose family migrated to New Caledonia at the end of the 19th century as part of the post-penal penitentiary 'idealistic' *colons* *Feillet*, also romanticised the life of these settlers in the bush, including the hardships endured, in such works as *Le Colon Broussard* (1942).

New Caledonian Voices. New Caledonia as Paradox

The first 'local' voice of note was Georges Baudoux (1870–1949), who combines tales of colonial life, stockmen and *la brousse* with attention to Melanesian stories in such works as *Légendes canaques*, said to be the products, however, 'of a backward human clan, stuck in its primitive barbarity'.¹⁷ A generation later came two local-born writers who were to be of importance for the future literary identity of New Caledonia, although they both spent most of their adult life in Europe. The first, Al(a)in Laubreaux (1899–1968), worked as a journalist in Paris where he contributed to the extreme right-wing and collaborationist journal *Je suis partout*, as a result of which he spent the remainder of his life after World War II in exile in Spain. His New Caledonian fiction, ambivalent though it is, deals in a critical way with the colonial society of the island, and his recent literary 'rehabilitation' was an important publishing event in the territory (e.g., *Le Rocher à la Voile* [1930/1996]).

The other author of this period, Jean Mariotti (1901–75),¹⁸ arguably remains the most significant writer to have been produced by New Caledonia. However, despite

being raised in the Caledonian bush in contact with Melanesians and becoming the rallying point for Caledonian literature in the first half of the 20th century, Mariotti, like Laubreaux, was an expatriate in France, whose recognition there culminated in his election as Vice-President of the *Société des Gens de Lettres* in 1962. Moreover, his vision of life in New Caledonia is often fearful, indeed apocalyptic, as well as nostalgic, even if in some of his works indigenous Melanesians become characters in their own right rather than serving as mere human décor or sources for transcribed folk tales.

Mariotti's novel *A bord de l'Incertaine* (1942) could be seen as emblematic of his work and his vision of New Caledonia. Set about 1900, it depicts a world out of joint in which people are not at ease with either their time or place. Melanesian culture is in decline and the chief's son, Téhin, deprived of power and replaced by 'puppets',¹⁹ realises that the days of glory are gone and that his kinsmen have become 'incomplete beings'.²⁰ The very title of the work indicates the degree of ambiguity and irony that characterise it. *L'Incertaine*, the shipwrecked boat lying off the coast of New Caledonia, appears as a martyred, Christ-like figure. It is an image of the island itself: close and seemingly available, but also mysterious and finally inaccessible, an enticing symbol of sacrificial death. Set half-way between the Kanak revolts of 1878 and 1917, at a time when the memory of the first uprising was still alive enough to make people aware of the possibility of another one, it is myth more than history that determines the tone and underlying phenomenology of the story, which is full of Romantic foreboding. Ironically, it is the novel's ludicrous colonials, the schoolteacher Madame Bourbignan and her administrator husband, who are perhaps the only souls not to be ultimately lost in this world, sure as they are of their values, which are not located in New Caledonia. The couple is merely

de passage, with no desire to assimilate or settle. They do not attempt what would be for them the impossible synthesis. There is no need to understand the Other. They have Right on their side.

Social Crisis and Literary Development

The figure of Mariotti dominated New Caledonian literature until his death in 1976. However, under the impulse of the social and political troubles of the *les événements*, the next decade saw a comparative flourish of literary activity by a new generation of writers with different perspectives, expatriate ‘metropolitans’ and native-born alike, the latter’s gaze no longer fixed on Paris. The expatriates were particularly active at first in the production of thrillers with political overtones (e.g., Baudouin Chailley’s *Nouméa, ville ouverte* and A.D.G.’s *Joujoux sur le caillou*) in which the island served as the backdrop for catastrophe, even universal apocalypse — a vogue that could not expect to outlive its heavily charged ideological moment. Perhaps the major work of this period is Jacqueline Sénès’s novel *Terre violente*, which tried to turn New Caledonia into a subject of history and myth at once. A career journalist, Sénès spent 30 years in the territory from the early 1950s through to the mid-1980s, before returning to metropolitan France. In New Caledonia, she had presented a weekly radio program reporting on events from all walks of life for many years and published books relating day-to-day traditions of territorial life that were in the process of disappearing.

Terre violente, written in the midst of *les événements* of the 1980s, nostalgically evokes the 1950s ideology of the *Union Calédonienne* — a political movement calling for greater local autonomy and inter-racial harmony — whose motto was ‘two colours, one people’ (*deux couleurs, un seul peuple*). Yet, despite its explicit attempt at historical reconstruction, the novel constantly attenuates past antagonisms by positing settlement on

the land, Kanak and colonial, as an atemporal constant, something outside history. In the process, the author imparts a metaphysical dimension to her work, in which the era of colonialism merges with that of myth, Western and indigenous. Ideologically, therefore, Sènès shifts the historical disputes of the island away from the settler/Kanak axis — portraying them as partners in an original ‘pact’ — to the situation of *métis* ‘tossed into the void’²¹ and making trouble as a result. Yet, despite her ambivalence, Sènès tries to show that it is only by recognising *métissage* as a doubly inclusive rather than exclusive category, seeing it as a chance for enrichment, as energy and will to live rather than as a handicap, that New Caledonia will be able to find its way forward into the future.²² This was very far from being a fashionable view at the time, when New Caledonia was a deeply divided land, politically and racially.

In contrast, the new generation of local writers, responding to the social unrest of the period and the repositioning that followed, have been longing more for the future than a romanticised past. By the 1990s, the New Caledonian ‘literary scene’ included Kanak authors, notably Déwé Gorodé, Wanir Wélépane and Pierre Gope. New perspectives from settler descendant authors were also emerging. Nicolas Kurtovitch, Louis-José Barbançon, Frédéric Ohlen and Catherine Régent, for example, were opening up inquiry into subjects of concern to this land of the hitherto ‘unspoken’ (*non dit*), while metropolitan-born writers, such as Claudine Jacques, Laurence Leroux and, more recently, Anne Bihan, Catherine Laurent and others have been making their life in New Caledonia and attempting to come to terms through their writing with their new situation. In all cases, the ‘local’ is not, or is no longer, seen as the ‘provincial’ or ‘exotic’, but as an opportunity to explore a highly specific form of the universal experience with an evolving means of expression.

This output, particularly that of the home-grown writers, at first took the form mainly of poetry, followed by short stories and, more recently, novels and plays. These works presented the attempts made by the various communities to express and assess the implications of political conflict and social polarisation, and their place in the new dispensation after the Matignon Accords (1988) and, a decade later, the Noumea Accord (1998).²³ If the former returned civil order to New Caledonia, a society that had been on the brink of civil war in the preceding few years, the latter explicitly called for the creation of a new society, a 'common destiny' for its diverse population and, in so doing, proposed the great challenge of forming a nation out of the embryo of a state.

In this context the search for identity, or possible identities, being undertaken by many in this multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic society, presents an interesting social development of which the considerable increase in the production of local works of imaginative literature is clearly a reflection. While still largely unknown,²⁴ it could be said that this writing is to some extent taking place in the image of the island itself, given the fact that its authors increasingly represent New Caledonia's ethnic and cultural diversity,²⁵ including the diversity of joint authorship even if, for obvious historical reasons, Kanak writing remains the exception rather than the rule.²⁶

The exception can be telling, however, as it is in the case of Déwé Gorodé, an original and forceful voice in contemporary Pacific writing, whom we are delighted to be introducing in English. She needs, of course, no introduction to many in the region, at least, due to her political function, being in charge of Culture, Sport and Youth Affairs in the New Caledonian Government. However, her literary output is not as well known as it should be outside New Caledonia, despite

the fact that she has published a number of works in various genres since her first volume of poetry, *Sous les cendres des conquies* (1985), appeared in the midst of the troubled years of the événements.

Déwé Gorodé and the Resurgence of Kanak Cultural Consciousness

Déwé Gorodé²⁷ was born in 1949 at Ponérihouen (Pwârâiriwâ) on the central east coast of New Caledonia in the Paicî linguistic region.²⁸ She grew up in a family that was both marked by the Protestant faith and imbued with the oral literary heritage of her people. Her paternal grandfather, Philippe Gorodé, and her maternal grandfather, Elaïcha Nâbaï, were trained as pastors by the French Protestant missionary and ethnologist, Maurice Leenhardt, in his mission, Do Neva, near Houaïlou on the central east coast of New Caledonia, in the Ajië linguistic region. And, early on, she was exposed to Kanak cultural and literary traditions, her father being something of a master in verbal jousting, at the same time as she heard Perrault's French fairy-tales retold by her siblings in Paicî.²⁹

Déwé Gorodé's early education was in the local Melanesian community school of the 'reserve', or 'customary lands' as they have come to be called. This was followed by several years in the French-language system in late primary school at Houaïlou, her father at the time managing a property nearby in the central mountain range, the *Grande Chaîne*, for a wealthy Noumean businessman. Her high school years were spent in Noumea, at the *Lycée La Pérouse*, where she successfully undertook her Baccalaureate and matriculated to university in 1969. She subsequently went to the Paul Valéry University in Montpellier, completing a Bachelor's degree (*Licence-ès-lettres*), in French literature in 1973.

Upon returning to New Caledonia, Déwé Gorodé took up a teaching position in a Catholic school at Saint-Louis

outside of Noumea. Like many in her generation, particularly those who had experienced the climate of social agitation in France in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she became politically active in the incipient cause of independence. After joining the *Foulards rouges* (Red scarves) movement, set up a few years earlier by Nidoïsh Naisseline, a *grand chef* from the Loyalty island of Maré, in 1974 she formed with Elie Poigoune the *Groupe 1878*, in memory of the Kanak revolt of that year under chief Atai.

Her growing militancy soon brought her into trouble with the law, and she was arrested for disturbing the peace during a sit-in in the law courts in Noumea in 1974 and sentenced to several months in prison. She was let out on parole, at least briefly, after a couple of months on compassionate grounds due to the fact that she had a seven-month-old daughter. Neither prison nor her domestic duties stopped her from pursuing her social activism. In 1976, she was one of the founders of the political party PALIKA (*Parti de Libération Kanak*), which evolved out of the *Groupe 1878*, and she has remained a leading member of this party ever since.³⁰ In July 1977, Déwé Gorodé was again interned in the Camp-Est prison in Noumea for a short period, having been sentenced for inciting violence and armed revolt through the publication of a tract written in the wake of the death of a young Kanak protestor.

In the 1980s, during the years of '*les événements*', Déwé Gorodé continued her political work in PALIKA, one aspect of which was her involvement in the setting up of the *Ecoles Populaires Kanak* (EPK), a network of schools designed as an alternative to the French education system to teach Kanak children about their own culture and in their own Kanak language(s). In 1984, after the formation of the FLNKS, she became a representative for external relations and, as such,

made many trips to speak at international conferences of developing countries and the non-aligned movement, United Nations' committees (New Caledonia was put on the UN decolonisation list in 1986³¹) and women's groups. This period of her life is reflected in the short story, *Dos Montes*, presented in this collection. In 1985, she published her first volume of poetry, *Sous les cendres des conquies*.

In the 1990s, Déwé Gorodé worked for a time for the *Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak* on cultural heritage projects, notably collecting and transcribing Melanesian tales and legends, particularly for use in schools. She then resumed her career as a teacher, of French and Paicî, her mother tongue, in high schools on the east coast. During these years she published two volumes of short stories, *Utê Mûrûnû* (1994) and *L'Agenda* (1996), and two books of poetry, *Par les temps qui courent* (1996) and *Dire le vrai* (1999), the latter written jointly with Nicolas Kurtovitch when they were on a lecture tour together in Australian universities in 1997. Also in 1997, she published *Pierre noire* (*Black Stone*), a French translation of verse by the ni-Vanuatu social activist and author, Grace Mera Molisa. In 1998, her play, *Têâ Kanaké*, was premiered at the Eighth Pacific Arts Festival held in Noumea.

At the same time, she remained very active in grass-roots politics for the PALIKA. After the Noumea Accord in 1998, she formally entered politics at the territorial level, in May 1999, as an elected representative to the New Caledonian *Congrès*, where she assumed the portfolio of Culture, Sport and Youth Affairs. Since April 2001, she has also been Vice-President of the New Caledonian Government.

Déwé Gorodé has thus continued to conduct a dual career, cultural and political, throughout her adult life. In essence, these two activities are twin aspects of the one drive. Indeed, her writing, like her career as a teacher, is an act

of cultural politics. Her double heritage, Paicî and French, can be seen in her texts, which reject exoticism and facile dichotomies in favour of a critical evaluation of and creative engagement with culture that often involves her in a transgression of boundaries. Her work consequently demands considerable effort on the part of the reader, at least — but not only — the Western reader. Her writing is a *mise en scène* of kinship relations within the Kanak world, an attempt at a reinterpretation of history, and an interplay of aesthetic forms that can catch the unfamiliar reader off guard as they cover their tracks, multiply narrative perspectives and to some degree ‘kanakise’ the French language.

This independent approach no doubt has its roots in her cultural and linguistic background. This can be partially attributed to the fact that the Paicî were affected by Christianity only at a late date, in spite of their relative numerical importance and the fact that the areas in which they lived stretched across the broad centre of the mainland. Whereas from the beginning of colonisation Catholics settled on the north-east coast, in Pouebo, Balade and other places, the Ponérihouen mission in the Paicî area further south was not established until the early 20th century. When the Protestant missionary and ethnologist, Maurice Leenhardt, set up his pastoral centre in 1903, it was in Do Neva, near Houaïlou, and it was into the local language (Ajië) that religious texts were translated and disseminated. Remaining, therefore, outside the regions where the missions were developing, Paicî speakers were converted to Christianity only at a time when French and Ajië were tending to be the dominant languages of evangelisation. Publications in Paicî were limited to a catechism that appeared in 1910 and a small reading book of the Gospel According to St Mark. All this rather limited linguistic impact of Christianity on Paicî,

at least until the 20th century, meant that the local language had a longer tradition of independence from French than in many other areas.³²

It is perhaps not by chance that Déwé Gorodé is heir to this background, even if it is true in a general way that Kanak written literature since Apollinaire Anova has been striving to assert its own distinctiveness by modifying its relationship, even when expressed in French, to the written language and by presenting or reformulating Kanak cultural values in French.³³ Déwé Gorodé's style abounds in examples where she expresses in French concepts taken from Paicî (temporality,³⁴ topography,³⁵ kinship structures³⁶), in addition to a lexis of native flora and other local references.

There is, moreover, a strong tradition of expression at the forefront of intercultural exchange on the paternal and maternal sides of her family. Her grandfather, Philippe Gorodé, was an informant for Maurice Leenhardt, just as her father, Waia Gorodé, subsequently was for the anthropologist, Jean Guiart. Moreover, Waia Gorodé was much more than a mere informant, penning two works, *Mon Ecole du Silence* and *Souvenirs d'un Neo-Calédonien ami de Maurice Leenhardt*, in his own right.³⁷ On Déwé Gorodé's maternal side, too, there was a tradition of writing. Her grandfather, the pastor Elaïcha Nâbaï, composed a *Discours de pilou*, and also left an autobiography and notes on the 1917 rebellion. As Bernard Gasser says in his postface to the French edition of *L'Agenda*, 'There is, therefore, in Déwé Gorodé's ancestry, a rather long tradition of writing, that is to say, to varying degrees, a profound ferment of social debate and criticism.'³⁸

Déwé Gorodé's own writing gives contemporary relevance — not without critical point where she deems it necessary — to the values of traditional culture, in order to work on rewriting Kanak history. This insertion in history and

volition to have an impact on the course of events can perhaps seem strange at first for an outsider who may be prone to a Western view of 'indigenous' peoples as having an eternal essentialist culture outside of history — a view that is a heritage of the European Enlightenment's supposed 'discovery' of 'natural' or 'primitive' man in the exploration of the island Pacific by the navigators of the second half of the 18th century.

This European vision could take the form of benevolent projection as Rousseau's 'noble savage', typically associated with what came to be known as Polynesia, or the obscure and fearsome and backward 'ignoble savage', more typically associated with Melanesia, whose peoples found themselves, like the Australian Aborigines, at the bottom of the Western hierarchy of racial taxonomies. The lines of such classificatory zeal came to be drawn more rigidly as the 19th century developed and Christianity undertook its work of subjugating the 'dark forces' where it could. Either way, an underlying essentialism was posited for the indigenous primitive peoples who were judged to be outside of history, be it in some idealised Golden Age, a mythological Eden, or frozen in deep time as discovered by the 19th century,³⁹ terrifyingly far removed from civilisation. Indeed, was not this the very notion of prehistory defined as being the situation of peoples without writing?

It is against this long and to some extent still persistent tradition that Déwé Gorodé writes; that is, as an agent of change with a mission to show that a consciousness of history has always been at the heart of Kanak culture. As Jean-Marie Tjibaou said in another, but related context, 'our past lies ahead of us.'⁴⁰ Indeed, this idea of a society on the move, fully committed to participating in the process of history as an open book, can be found throughout Déwé Gorodé's works, where characters, particularly women, often decide to live out their

individual point of view in the complex hierarchical space of kinship networks and colonial impositions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the opening story of the collection, *Utê Mûrûnû*, which gave its name to the first volume of short stories that appeared roughly midway between the Matignon Accords (1988) and the Noumea Accord (1998).

If Déwé Gorodé's first volume of verse, *Sous les cendres des conques* (1985), had revealed the lyricism of nature and a strong political commitment, *Utê Mûrûnû* offers a very different, dense and sustained example of writing involving reflection on the past and future alike, embedded in an elaborate textual construction. The first five stories presented here are from that collection, four of which deal with daily life in a Melanesian setting, while the fifth concerns a meeting of women from the developing world in Sydney, Australia. From the outset the work deals with major themes: memory, tradition, the land, kinship relations and the role of women. The first story, after which the collection is named, encompasses, as it were, the entire history of New Caledonia from the beginning of colonialism in the mid-19th century until the dawn of the 21st century through a series of relationships between grandmothers and granddaughters, all called Utê Mûrûnû. These are the bearers of Melanesian culture, which is intimately bound up with the Earth. It is, quite literally, a matter of life and death: 'Only the earth remains [...] We cannot live without it and yet we are bleeding it a little more each day.'⁴¹ The text is made more complex by the fact that Kanak pro-independence discourse is projected on to the situation of women through the metaphor of the land, thereby transforming, by analogy, Kanak men into the colonisers of women. The story creates new traditions and a new or renewed sense of history, through the interplay of female genealogies and through the use of the recursive rhetorical device of the *mise en abyme*.

The Cordyline, the second story, further develops this relation of traditions, oral and written, but in this case through the character of a grandfather, ‘the symbol of the breath of life’,⁴² who, as a young child in school, was fascinated by the alphabet and able to reconcile indigenous and Western traditions by giving song to script, dance to text, lightness to life lived as festivity. The story discreetly creates a cycle in which a series of couples separated by time are linked genealogically and by means of the narrative’s textual complexity, which makes it difficult to distinguish between the different couples at certain points — with three distinct narrators (the grandfather’s granddaughter through marriage; a cousin of that grandfather, who had been in love with him in her youth; and his brother by custom). The moments in time described and the points of convergence in the text both constitute ‘an occasion for getting to know each other’.⁴³ History and story are intertwined, such that narrative and reality, narrator and character, past and present, merge in a time reminiscent of myth.

The title of the third story, *It is Already Tomorrow*, seems to announce the future, but the story, which in fact relates 24 hours in the life of a woman in her Kanak village setting, *en tribu*, has death at its centre. The tragic events that punctuate the lives of women serve to underscore the misery that is their daily lot, their destiny being to serve men during their life and to take on all the responsibility once they are dead. The story is also a litany of woes stemming from growing Kanak consumerism and an account of the imbalance between life in the tribe and the demands of modern living, on which the Matignon Accords are portrayed as having had little impact: ‘and here we are about to enter the 21st century, after all the suffering and sorrow of the ‘events’, still drinking as much, if not more, with AIDS and cannabis for our kids to boot.’⁴⁴

The next two stories present different aspects of women's lives. *The Kanak Apple Season* is an allegory of power relations exploiting superstition, and a denunciation of charlatanism masquerading as tradition, while the other, the last of the collection, *Dos montes*, set in Sydney, follows women as actors in the Third World revolutionary scene. But if the women in this story have broken away from their past, it is to further enhance the cause of their people. In doing so, these sisters forge new and different alliances, even risking their lives as a result of their actions.

The subsequent nine stories presented here originally constituted Gorodé's second collection, *L'Agenda*, published in 1996. In a general way, they could be said to concentrate on the encounter with the Other. They present moments of Kanak life *en tribu*, on the reserve, the 'customary lands', pre- and post-World War II, although most have a contemporary setting. They alternate between a realist approach to social questions and contexts and a 'magic realism' investing everyday life with an imaginative dimension not reducible to Western rationality. Yet these moments of dream and memory, of the past captured as tradition in an extended present, are themselves inserted into the flow of history. Thus *The Hut* and *A Lady in the Night* deal with attachment to the traditional hut, 'case', and a sense of the fragility, impermanence and continual renewal of human (Kanak) presence in symbiosis with nature. The encounter between Kanaks and Europeans and the generational shifts in attitudes that have taken place in the past quarter of a century are also explored in a number of stories. A mythic reversal of fortune in which revenge is wreaked on history, is also portrayed, as women take back their bodies, their lives and their land (e.g., in the story *Where are you going, Mûû?*).

Yet this very reversal of history raises the question of identity in a place where boundaries can seem blurred, and the

difference between dream images and reality is unclear. The familiar is also the uncanny in *The Ferryman*, for example: 'a familiar face that I myself perhaps infused with mystery, considering the state I was in and the whole atmosphere of the place that night.'⁴⁵ An aura of unreality pervades the text, and artificial or altered states seem to intersect with real ones in this world. At the same time, there is a political overlay to this atmosphere of the 'strangely familiar',⁴⁶ in which one colonisation (of Indo-China) is identified with another (New Caledonia). The 'ferryman' is not only associated with death as a figure of the Styx, but is seen as someone overcoming death, turning defeat into victory. In fact, he is the memory of place and person, the rhythm of tides and seasons, and extends beyond a Melanesian context to the vitality of other cultures, in this case, Vietnamese.

Encounters is an idyllic presentation of a city-reared young person's discovery of the natural environment on her first visit to her ancestral village, where a veritable inventory of indigenous names for native flora makes the Western reader aware of the specifically Kanak world that he or she is entering, to be gladly swept along with the flow of lyrical beauty presenting bees 'gathering honey from the fragrant flowers of a native cordyline bush in the thick of a spray of passion-fruit flowers in bloom, wild morning glories and other similar climbers'.⁴⁷ Yet, in this setting, the 'natural' seems again to meet the surreal, with the news that the grandparents who greeted the girl on her arrival had died 40 years earlier. But what might appear to be magic realism is also an affirmation of the indivisibility of the Kanak chain of being, and the perpetuation of kinship through the identification and replacement of generations. This atmosphere of unreality is maintained in *Ab(using) Time*, in which the first-person narrator has become a pure spirit able to glide effortlessly

among the vegetation and report on the activities of those around him. Yet he does this, as we learn, after having missed the chance himself to express love in life to the one who loved him, and then dying a pointless death in the war far from home in his 'misshapen uniform'.⁴⁸ This twin-edged poignancy, the sense of opportunity taken and lost, is given an urban setting in *Benjie, My Brother*, a contemporary tale of two young Kanaks coming of age in the era of social unrest of the 1980s, the one *en route* to political awareness seen as the apotheosis of contemporary existence, the other sliding aimlessly down the alternative path of alienation, cultural loss, AIDS and death. Death, that of a young woman in childbirth, is also present in *Lida's Diary*, which nonetheless is a positive tale of expectancy through the experience of political effervescence of the years of the 'événements'. It shows the development of a political consciousness, among young and old alike, particularly in the Kanak villages, but, beyond any 'documentary' value, it is also a delicate portrait of the hesitations and vulnerability of youth trying to cope with the inter-personal, the sexual and the political all at once.

The most complex and interesting story from the collection *L'Agenda*, however, is perhaps *Closed Case*, which metaphorically recounts New Caledonian colonial history through three different eras, all times of conflict, each featuring a central male protagonist from a different background: a young settler about to go off and be killed in the Great War; an American soldier stationed in New Caledonia during World War II, who will lose his life at Guadalcanal; and a Kanak NCO parachutist with the French army stationed in the territory during *les événements* of the 1980s. Each of these soldiers on foreign soil, including the Kanak in his 'traitor's skin [...] this renegade's uniform'⁴⁹ (a throw-back, as paralleled by the text, to the betrayal committed by some Kanaks in the

1878 insurrection), is ‘spellbound’⁵⁰ by a beautiful young woman under a banyan tree — the sacred tree of the ancestors for Kanaks — dressed in a flowing white gown, each time different and yet always the same as Marguérite, Margaret and Maguy. Accompanied by her grandfather, a fisherman, she wears long white gloves covering her burnt fingers — hence her name, Cindere-Fingers — and bears each time an uncanny resemblance to the soldiers’ own beloved. This resemblance is so great that each one bequeaths his fortune to her before going off to his death. It turns out that the identity of this young woman, who subsequently appears dressed in black, is the same as that of ‘a young Melanesian woman from times gone by’⁵¹ burned alive when her parents’ house was set alight during the Kanak uprising of 1878. She is therefore a haunting symbol of Kanak resistance, of innocence persecuted, of retribution — ‘with a triumphant smile on her lips’⁵² — and of the land, given that she seems to be part of the vegetation, even merging with the banyan tree. Kanak memory, inscribed in text, is here more than cultural artefact or nostalgia. It is put in the active service of a contemporary political project.

Written by a university-educated Melanesian from an oral cultural tradition, these stories are innovative precisely because, through their critical interplay with tradition, they try to reconcile custom and modernity by reinstating suppressed practices and creating other traditions that hold promise for the future. And while this discursive (at least) reappropriation of history by its dispossessed, and by those who are doubly dispossessed on account of being female and Kanak, certainly takes place in French, it is a French in which the reader is obliged to adopt Kanak images and perspectives and even, to some extent, vocabulary in order to gain proper understanding.

Modernity and tradition, kinship systems in Kanak village settings and the problems of contemporary urban

contexts, women's liberation and custom, political action and explorations of being, are all at stake for Déwé Gorodé in this collection of stories. Through its *mises en abyme*, its anticipations and flashbacks, its realistic and magical realistic features, its transformed repetitions and returns of various kinds, her work is constantly echoing itself, forever weaving past and future into each other, establishing its own traditions in the workings of a very (post)modern form of writing that features a plurality of voices. In this *œuvre*, which ultimately strives to rewrite the future more than the past, Gorodé exploits myth and traditional cultural contexts, but her figures are literary tropes devoid of traditionalist essentialism.

However, if history is anti-essentialist, unequal to itself, what is culture other than a constant process of interaction, if not *métissage* — a phenomenon given greater, albeit distorted, focus under the influence of colonialism? As Jacqueline Sènès's novel, *Terre Violente*, showed, *métissage* has long been one of the taboo subjects in New Caledonia, but it would seem that in these stories, through the interweaving of tradition and modernity, myth and literature, oral and written practices, Kanak culture and colonial history, Kanak perspectives and — indeed, expressed in — the French language, Déwé Gorodé has created a prime example of a cultural artefact of *métissage* that may well turn out to be a precursor of a more general cultural awareness in New Caledonia, as the island continues on its delicate and by no means even path of self-reassessment. This is perhaps the most profound message her texts have to offer — an implicit social project that subjects the Western and customary traditions to a dynamic of creativity in order to bring out, at least as projection, an open future.

Footnotes for Introduction

- ¹ With the constitutional changes brought about by the Noumea Accord (1998), New Caledonia is no longer, technically, a French Overseas Territory. It has become, 'simply', *la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, and its constitutional status has shifted from that of a *Territoire d'outre-mer* to that, uniquely, of a *Pays d'outre-mer*, i.e., an 'overseas country'. For convenience, and given the unresolved nature of the latter term in many respects, the term 'territory' is still used here to designate New Caledonia.
- ² The other two French Pacific Territories are French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna. French *Territoires d'outre-mer*, while remaining, like the *Départements d'outre-mer*, an integral part of France, have specific constitutional and administrative arrangements which allow a greater local autonomy than the latter. The *Accord de Nouméa* (1998) provides for greater decentralisation, allowing New Caledonia's *Congrès* the capacity to make laws in certain areas (e.g., immigration, employment).
- ³ For further details, see Alain Christnacht, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Notes et Etudes documentaires, No. 4839, La Documentation française, Paris, 1987, p.7.
- ⁴ K(k)anak(e)(s)/K(k)anak (invariable)/C(c)anaque(s): in this single (?) word is inscribed a whole history, political as well as linguistic, of New Caledonia. And orthography is not merely a matter for debate among academics. Until the late 1980s, the graphic 'K', particularly in its invariable form, was associated with the political affirmation of the independence movement, as in, for example, the FLNKS (*Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste*). The 'K' form appears now to be passing into general use, but one can still find non-Kanak examples of the more traditional and 'cautious' 'C' (*Canaque*), although officially both forms are admitted. The 'normalisation' of the 'K' form has been accompanied, however, by its inflexion or banalisation as substantive or adjective. No longer *hors la loi*, it is consequently now subject to 'agreement', as Déwé Gorodé's text, *Utê Mûrûnû*, shows *passim*, although Alban Bensa and Eric Wittersheim, in their presentation of the writings and interviews of the Kanak independence leader, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, follow the example of the *Nouveau Petit Robert* (1993 edition) by allowing declension

of the noun to signal a plural, while maintaining the adjectival form invariable. See Jean-Marie Tjibaou, *La Présence Kanak*, Paris, Editions Edile Jacob, 1996.

- ⁵ The population of 200,000 is composed of approximately 45 per cent Melanesians, 34 per cent so-called ‘*Caldoches*’, i.e., the descendants of European settlers and convicts and those assimilated (see following paragraph below), 12 per cent Polynesians (mostly remittance workers from Wallis and Futuna, but including some Tahitians), 3 per cent Indonesians, and others (Vietnamese, ni-Vanuatu, Antillais, Arabs, etc.). There are officially 28 distinct Melanesian languages. Of these, Drehu, from the Loyalty island of Lifou, is the most widely spoken, with about 10,000 speakers — now less than the number of people speaking Wallisian. Other ‘minority’ languages, reflecting the aforementioned ethnic groups, are spoken. A very localised *créole* persists at Saint-Louis, south of Noumea. The universal language, spoken by virtually the entire population, is French. Whatever any future constitutional change may bring, New Caledonia is very likely to remain francophone.

‘*Caldoche*’: once (and to some extent still) a pejorative reference, this term is now embraced by many of the younger generation of descendants of the European settler population in New Caledonia. This ethnic but by no means political minority today constitutes about one-third of the territory’s population of nearly 200,000 (see also above, note iv). Reflection on the ‘*identité Caldoche*’ has been given in recent years by the historian, Louis-José Barbançon (*Le Pays du Non-Dit*, etc.), and the ‘*Collectif Caldoche*’ (*Etre Caldoche Aujourd’hui*, etc.), and via a metropolitan historian, Isabelle Merle, *Expériences coloniales. Nouvelle-Calédonie (1853–1920)*.

- ⁶ The Noumea Accord (1998) announces the goal of a ‘common destiny’ for New Caledonia’s diverse peoples.

- ⁷ The name ‘Lapita’ comes from a corruption of the Haveke language place name Xapetaa, near Koné on the west coast of New Caledonia. See Christophe Sand, *Archéologie des origines. Le Lapita calédonien* (p.33). This pre-colonial heritage, which is associated particularly with dentate-shaped pottery, is still being unearthed. Excavations began in the 1950s, but it was not until

the 1990s that extensive exploration of the Lapita site got under way with the uncovering of dozens of square metres of archaeological surface, showing the richness and diversity of the deposits, 'the most diverse collection of well-preserved dentate-stamped pottery thus far discovered in the south-western Pacific' (Sand, p.41). The same author has said that he and his team 'would need three hundred years to explore this archeological legacy properly' (personal communication).

⁸ The often received view is that Cook, finding that the inhabitants had given no general name to the island, called it New Caledonia, as the impressive hills he saw on the east coast supposedly reminded him of parts of Scotland. In a similar vein, on the same voyage he named the neighbouring islands, now known as Vanuatu, the New Hebrides. The first known French navigator to visit New Caledonia was d'Entrecasteaux in 1792, although it is possible that La Pérouse did so in 1788, before embarking on his final, fatal voyage, which saw him shipwrecked at Vanikoro in the Solomon Islands.

⁹ For a detailed account of this whole period of the penal colony, see Louis-José Barbançon, *L'Archipel des forçats. L'histoire du bagne de Nouvelle-Calédonie (1863–1931)*.

¹⁰ See *intra* for details, in endnotes, as the occasion arises.

¹¹ For an account of the Melanesia 2000 festival and of Kanak culture in general, see Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Philippe Missotte, *Kanaké. L'homme mélanésien*.

¹² This is the word that was also used to describe the Algerian War (1954–62) until the French Parliament belatedly gave it a different recognition in 1999.

¹³ See, for instance, Stephen Henningham, *France and the South Pacific. A Contemporary History*, p.69.

¹⁴ These accords were subsequently ratified in a national referendum in November of the same year. (The participation rate for the total French population was 37 per cent [63 per cent in New Caledonia], of which 80 per cent in metropolitan France voted in favour of the Rocard plan, compared with only 57 per cent in favour in New Caledonia.) Besides the new constitutional framework, these accords created, from July 1989, three provinces (North, South, Loyalty Islands), and provided

- substantial additional development funds. They remained in place until being superseded by the Noumea Accord in 1998.
- ¹⁵ *Accord de Nouméa*, Section 5, 'L'évolution de l'organisation politique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie'.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, Alban Bensa and Jean-Claude Rivierre, 'De quelques genres littéraires dans la tradition oral paicî', in *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, No. 50, t. XXXII, March 1976, pp.31–64.
- ¹⁷ Georges Baudoux, *Légendes canaques 1. Les Vieux savaient tout*, 1928, Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1952, p.8.
- ¹⁸ The publishing house, Grain de Sable, has been producing critical editions of Mariotti's collected works in 13 volumes (1996–2003).
- ¹⁹ Jean Mariotti, *A bord de l'Incertaine*, 1942, Noumea: Editions Grain de Sable, 1996, p.41.
- ²⁰ Mariotti, *A bord de l'Incertaine*, p.42.
- ²¹ Sénès, *Terre violente*, p.138.
- ²² A cinematic adaptation of this novel was shown in early May 1998 on the French channel ARTE, in celebration of the signing in Noumea of the *Accord de Nouméa* by the FLNKS-RPCR leaders and Lionel Jospin and Jean-Jacques Queyranne, French Prime Minister and Overseas Territories Minister respectively, on behalf of the French State. The same screening in New Caledonia in July that year gave rise to strong reactions, particularly from RPCR quarters, especially about the ending (not, admittedly, spelled out by the novel itself), which announced independence as a future reality. Sensitivities in New Caledonia, the *Accord de Nouméa* notwithstanding, can still be acute in this respect.
- ²³ At the same time, it is worth noting in the vein of popular culture the appearance of more than a dozen volumes of *La Brousse en folie* (1984–) by the Caledonian writer and cartoonist, Bernard Berger, whose comic strip stories featuring cultural stereotypes have had great popularity, indeed best-seller status, in the territory.
- ²⁴ The anthology by François Bogliolo, *Parole et Ecritures. Anthologie de la littérature néo-calédonienne*, Noumea, Les Editions du Cagou, 1994, was ground-breaking in this regard, providing

an interesting and courageous attempt at making this literature known to a wider public beyond a few specialists. Anne-Marie Nisbet had already published in 1983 an *Anthologie de la Littérature de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, but this was before the dramatic developments of that decade and the literary revival that took place in New Caledonia. A number of literary reviews during the 1970s and 1980s, most notably the all too short-lived *Flamboyant imaginaire*, edited by Hélène Colombani, and the contribution of local critics such as Paul Griscelli and Bernard Gasser, had already given the impetus to this revival. More recently, the *Transcultures* group at the Université Française du Pacifique, Noumea, under the direction of Professor Dominique Jouve, has done much to 'rediscover' and promote in scholarly editions the literature of the territory (e.g., the collected works of Jean Mariotti, re-editions of Georges Baudoux, and the literary 'rehabilitation' of Alin Laubreaux). In this context, the role of the publishing house, Grain de sable, established by Laurence Viallard in the early 1990s, has been a major development in facilitating quality and affordable (not always hitherto the case in New Caledonia!) publications. Moreover, in another significant move, Grain de sable has brought together under the one roof, 'European' and Melanesian voices in its program of publishing contemporary writing. Kanak voices have also been heard in the successful quarterly, *Mwà Vée*, published by the *Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak* since 1993. The latter also brought out a special edition in English, *Living Heritage. Kanak Culture Today*, to coincide with the Eighth Pacific Arts Festival held in Noumea in October 2000.

²⁵ This includes the recent phenomenon of trans-racial diverse authorship, as, for example, in the joint efforts of Nicolas Kurtovitch and Déwé Gorodé (*Dire le vrai*, 1999) and Nicolas Kurtovitch and Pierre Gope (*Les Dieux sont borgnes*, 2001).

²⁶ Anthropologists and linguists such as Maurice Leenhardt, Jean Guiart, Jean-Claude Rivierre and Alban Bensa have, in the past century, brought out the richness of the Melanesian oral tradition in New Caledonia. Moreover, the work undertaken by the *Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak* to keep this heritage alive is confirmation of its contemporary cultural

significance. In the context of this tradition, the production of written literary texts remains, however, the exception.

²⁷ 'Gorodey' is the spelling under the French administration. In Paicî, her name would be pronounced with nasalised vowels, as 'Görödé' (personal communication from author).

²⁸ For more detailed information on her clan origin, see the preface written by her relative, Téâ Auru Mwatéâpoo, to *Sous les cendres des conques*. p.iv.

²⁹ Personal communication from the author.

^{30/31} In this context, particularly given Déwé Gorodé's current position as Minister of Culture in New Caledonia, it is worth noting that PALIKA did not at the time agree with the approach of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, then leader of the *Union Calédonienne*, to advance the Kanak political cause via the promotion of culture, as represented by his initiative in organising the Melanesia 2000 Festival in 1975. As Déwé Gorodé has said in an interview, PALIKA considered this festival to be a folklorisation and trivialisation of Kanak culture and a distraction from more serious forms of political action. *Littérature de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Notre Librairie, 1998, p.77.

³² See Stephen Henningham, *France and the South Pacific. A Contemporary History*, p.210.

³³ I am indebted to Jean-Claude Rivierre for information on this historical context. See his *Dictionnaire Paicî-Français*, Société d'Etudes Linguistiques et Anthropologiques de France, Paris, 1983, pp.13–20.

³⁴ See Hamid Mokaddem, 'L'Exiguïté de la littérature kanak contemporaine de 1965 à 2000' in *La Création littéraire dans le contexte de l'exiguïté*, ed., Robert Viau, Publications MNH, Beauport, Canada, 2000.

³⁵ Gorodé's use of the imperfect tense, for example, often assimilates the actions of people to the time and space in which they find themselves. Description is not gratuitous, it does not serve the purpose of providing mere décor or setting. For Gorodé, the frame of reference, the cadre, the place, are very important. In fact, the whole relation to topography, to the lie of the land, determines one's being in the world. This is not, however, an essentialist position, fixed once and for all. Deixis is being put

into action in so far as multiple perspectives are possible. A similar situation of strangeness and deviation occurs with respect to Gorodé's use of the future tense. This particular use of the future to describe an action in the past, but beyond the time of other actions in the past, is sometimes a French literary device and sometimes an idiosyncratic Kanak way of indicating that the person, or the memory, lives on. There can even be the deliberate projection into the future of a Kanak viewpoint, anticipating (even oneirically), willing, determining the unfolding of history, where the future tense serves as a sign of a powerful memory that is not forgotten and which will always remain.

³⁶ As a general rule, French tends to make allusions explicit or precise. It has a greater need of this than does English, which makes considerable use of deixis on which the principle of allusion rests. Quite different are things in Déwé Gorodé's Paicî world and hence in her French expression. In her writing there are regularly recurring allusions such as '*là-haut*'/'up there', '*de l'autre côté*'/'on the other side', that give an implicit, but not explicit, context that is further obscured for the non-Kanak reader by the seemingly imprecise deixis without nominal complement: 'on the other side' of what, one may wish to ask? One has to be in the know already, as it were, to be sharing the perspective of the Kanak characters, in order to know what is going on where.

³⁷ The importance of kinship is not just in terms of relations within the clan, the role of 'custom' is also reflected in Gorodé's syntax, through her use of circumstantial locutions. In this regard, Paicî is closer to French than to English through its use of circumstantial phrases, where the beginning of the sentence precedes the introduction of the main subject or argument. In general, French does not begin with the essential, but brings the reader gradually towards the real goal or idea of the utterance, which hence plays the syntactic role of being the climax of the sentence. Since the real purpose is deferred until towards the end, circumstantial phrases, which merely serve to qualify it without being the focus of the message, tend to be placed at the beginning of the utterance or, at any rate, before the verb,

especially if they have a causal meaning; cause logically preceding effect in the logic of French, unlike English, which typically goes directly to the subject and verb first.

38 Déwé Gorodé has herself expressed a certain ambivalence towards this family tradition, showing kinship respect, even pride and admiration, but also a certain historical understanding and critical perspective. About this role of informant, she has said that 'It is already quite something that an elder of the age of my father, with the little schooling he had, could produce such a thing, and what would have been the point of my saying anything against this?'. Interview published in *Littérature de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Notre Librairie, Paris, 1998, p.80.

39 Gorodé, *L'Agenda*, p.107.

40 See Alice Bullard, *Savagery and Civilization*.

41 See *La Présence Kanak*, eds, Alban Bensa and Eric Wittersheim, Editions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1996.

42 Déwé Gorodé, *intra* p.35.

43 Gorodé, *intra*, p.55.

44 Gorodé, *intra*, p.41.

45 Gorodé, *intra*, p.64.

46 Gorodé, *intra* p.136.

47 Gorodé, *intra*, p.137.

48 Gorodé, *intra*, p.148.

49 Gorodé, *intra*, p.157.

50 Gorodé, *intra*, p.126.

51 Gorodé, *intra*, p.120.

52 Gorodé, *intra*, p.115.

53 Gorodé, *intra*, p.122.

Contents

Utê Mûrûnû, little coconut flower	1
The Cordyline	41
It is Already Tomorrow	61
The Kanak Apple Season	73
‘Dos montes ...’	83
The Hut	95
A Lady in the Night	99
Where are you going, Mûû?	103
Case Closed	111
The Ferryman	133
Encounters	145
(Ab)using Time	153
Benjie, My Brother ...	159
Lida’s Diary	179
Footnotes	195
About the Translator	227

Utê Mûrûnû, little coconut flower

*D*ui Nâtê¹ was just finishing nailing in the stud that would fasten the third row of barbed wire. Dripping with sweat, he took off his top all stained with banana tree sap and wiped his face. Just as he was about to rub his neck, he blinked under the rays of sunlight piercing through the thin foliage of the niaouli² trees. Then, with a gaze no longer distracted by either sweat or sun, he quickly made out the familiar figure on horseback climbing up the small stretch of pebbly track from the foot of the hill. It was definitely Téâ, his big brother by custom. He put his singlet back on and went over to the nearby creek where the shirt and *manou*³ he had washed in the morning were drying. After a quick once over, he put them on before going down to meet his older brother under the shade of the mango tree. If he had specially come out all this way from their reserve⁴ to this private property of the *popwaalé*⁵ where for the past three weeks he, the younger boy, had been doing his compulsory work service,⁶ it meant that there must be serious business at hand.

As he was washing his face in the fresh water of the creek, the visit that this very same big brother had paid him at the Missionary School a few years before flashed clearly into his mind. The same furtive anxiety before the gravity of the situation gripped him now as then. What new weighty message⁷ would his older brother share with him this time? No doubt it concerned

a marriage, just like that morning down at the school, when he had come to point him in the direction of customary union. He briefly thought of the beautiful butterfly with big, blue, black-rimmed wings which, late the previous day, had brushed past his wrist, making as if to land on it after swirling round a few times above his head. So that was what that gracious approach foretold. Then he remembered the dream that had been puzzling him this past week, in which he had seen himself at a junction of mountain paths⁸ with someone who was very familiar to him but whose face he could not make out at first. This person was telling him about the different directions leading away from the crossing. And, just as he was asking him to repeat the name of two of the tracks, he recognised him. It was their grandfather long since dead, with a big grin on his face. He was beautifully attired in traditional garb, with a plume in his hair and a head-breaker in his hand, preparing to go off to a feast.⁹

When his brother noticed him under the mango tree, he pulled up his horse, got down and tied it to one of the freshly cut niaouli tree trunks, into which bits of barbed wire from the recently redone fence had been nailed. Then, letting him graze on the grass of the ditch, he went over to Dui.

‘I’ve come with our younger brother Gorôî. I told him to wait for me down below at the wooden footbridge, near the coffee plantation.’¹⁰

‘It must have been a rough trip for you in this heat.’

‘We weren’t in too much of a hurry and we thought we’d go back down at night, when it’s cooler.’

‘Up here we can have a bit of a breather this week as the foreman is away. He is sick and the word is that the doctor has sent him to hospital in Noumea.’

'Yeah, that's what we heard down at home. That's why we wanted to make the most of it and come up here today. Especially as today's also the day when the boss works in his butcher shop down in the village. I asked Missus over at the station if I could come and see you.'¹¹

'Fine. This way we can talk in peace.'

'The reason why we've come up here today is to tell you about two tasks that lie ahead. Father¹² has informed me that the maternal cousins¹³ from over the mountain and across the river¹⁴ have sent two messages with a view to strengthening the links that already unite us. They are thinking of coming to confirm it all soon. The ones living over the mountain would like our daughter Utê Mûrûnû to join them up there. And those from across the river are looking to you, Nâtêî, regarding our second daughter.'¹⁵

'That is really very good news that you bring me, big brother. Be thanked for it and may God bless your soul! As for us, we have only two weeks left to finish the fences. As soon as it is over, we will come down and prepare it all together.'

'Good, as once again our uncles do us too much of an honour and we mustn't disappoint them. But, there is one particular thing I would like to talk to you about whilst we're on the subject. And that is the real aim of my visit here today. It's about our customary daughter and milk sister,¹⁶ Mûrûnû. I'm not sure that she wants to go up to join the maternal side. She won't listen to either the mothers or the aunts. Mother and I can always try to speak to her, but she will disobey if she has a mind to. This is always a very tricky business, as it's rather up to women to advise each other about such things. We men can only get involved in very exceptional circumstances. And here we are forced into it, seeing that our daughter, who was raised in our family with us, is very strong-willed. Nor can we count on her namesake, our old grandmother Utê Mûrûnû,

as she will support her come what may. The only one she would be prepared at least to listen to is you. She prefers you to all of us. If you talk to her, she will follow your advice. That's how it's been up to now.'

'Oh no, my big brother! I don't think so. She will listen to you just as well, if you talk to her. It is true that she is rather unruly, but she may end up taking your advice.'

'No, I'm not so sure. You're the only one she'll give an inch to. Think of how often when we were growing up she stuck up for you when we got into squabbles. Remember when she hurt me on the forehead with that sharp pebble because I had beaten you with a guava tree branch? And when Father stepped in, it was to defend her. And do you remember when he was absolutely adamant that she should go to school and learn how to read and write like a boy? Normally, he would let it be known that the role of girls was confined to the maternal clan whose number they should dutifully serve to increase, but she was his favourite and he turned a blind eye to all her whims and fancies. How often we resented him for all that! That's why she thinks she can do as she pleases all the time now. Father spoiled her too much. And now that he's no longer here, we're the ones left with the consequences of such an upbringing.'

'Yes, what you say is true, big brother. And I promise you that I will do my best to make our daughter see reason.'

'That would really make my task easier and take a great weight off my shoulders. I had come to see you, my little brother, with this hope in mind, and now I can go back down to our place in peace.'

'Yes, you do that, big brother. As for us, we still have two weeks to go here. And then we'll meet up again, back down at home.'

'Yes, see you soon down there!'

Dui Nâtêi stayed up for a long time that night in the hut whose walls and roof were made out of niaouli 'skins' that served as shelter for him and the other Kanaks subjected to forced labour on this settler's private property.¹⁷ With his pen-knife, he cut up one of the sticks of tobacco that his brother had brought him. Then he rubbed the chips in the palm of his hand before wrapping them in tiny oblong pieces of dried banana leaf. He lit his home-made cigarettes with the help of the incandescent tips of firebrand and sat smoking like that for hours on a dusty old sack, his legs stretched out in front of the fire where little intermittent flames leapt up as a swarm of small sparks from the slowly burning logs. His customary brother's visit had shaken him up, just like the one a few years ago, which he now saw again more clearly than ever in the quiet of the night.

It was the work season when the earth had to be made ready for the planting of yams. On the long rectangular balk he dug the first row of holes with his best friend Alec, a young man from the area. Voices rang out from the group of girls who were bustling about in a manioc field nearby, letting him know that a young girl of about eight was coming to fetch him.

'Dui, "Missi"¹⁸ wants you to go up to his house. You've got a visitor.'

'I'll catch up with you later, Alec.'

He put the old wooden shovel in the broad ditch and went down to have a wash in the nearby river before taking the path up to the missionary's residence. He reached it from the garden side just as the 'Missi' caught sight of him.

‘Ah! There you are, Dui! Now then, go and take a look out front, you’ve got a visitor.’

‘Yes, Missi.’

He rushed out into the corridor hoping that it might be something to do with one of his aunts, who was no doubt sitting beside one of her baskets full of boiled lobsters or smoked dawas.¹⁹ Imagine his surprise when, stepping out on to the big porch, he saw his customary big brother under the old mango tree in the yard, with his hands behind his back admiring the perfumed flowering of the Polynesian frangipanis. Before he could say a thing, the missionary’s voice behind him announced, ‘Téâ, Dui’s here. I’ll let you two have a talk and be back in a little while.’

Téâ turned round and moved quietly forward.

‘Ah, here you are, Dui! So, you’re starting on the fields? We’re doing the same back home. But I’ve deserted the elders²⁰ a little by coming in the trochus²¹ fishermen’s boat to visit you here. We left at night and they dropped me off at the wharf at dawn. I had a coffee at grandfather Nâwidaa’s and then made my way here slowly on foot.’

‘Yes.’

‘Back down at our place, our two fathers are preparing for the custom of mourning for Gèè Nâkéö, from over the mountain. That’s at the end of the week. The aunts have assembled their latest mats for it, and the young ones are finishing the coffee picking at Jeannot’s and are now going to get on to the copra. The day before yesterday, the police came looking for Cau, who dumped his work for the old *diibéré*.²² The old man whipped him until he bled, as he had insulted him in Paicî.²³ I told the police that I didn’t know where he was. Since last night, the trochus fishermen have taken him with them. Afterwards, we’ll see where we have to hide him, so that he doesn’t go back to that *popwaalé* any more. For, believe me,

that Jeannot is the worst of the lot of them, judging by Cau's puffed-up face and back.

'They've already taken everything from us and yet we still have to go and suffer this hard labour on their properties for them. And when we are unfortunate enough to be thirsty, they whip us until we bleed. How long is all this going to last? In their schools like this one, they teach us to pray, and worship Jesus, and that all men are brothers, but they themselves are not men. We don't know why they're like that.'

'Yes.'

'Little brother, I'm telling you all this and time's going by. I have to get a move on if I want to be at grandad Nâwidaa's place, as there's a boat heading up there this afternoon. That way, I can sleep at grandfather Kolié's place and tomorrow I'll be back home.'

'Yes.'

'I actually came to talk about something else. I was supposed to tell you that our two fathers have had quite a few talks about you this year. They were wondering if you fancied any particular girl. Of course, they both have several customary paths²⁴ to propose. I've taken it upon myself to select three from among our closest relatives. There is the girl from up in the valley at Nâwâmêînâ, and the one from across the river at Goroba. But the trouble in both cases is religion. Those from up in the valley haven't adopted the same new practices as us.²⁵ As to those from across the river, well, our old grandfather Céu's kept to our old gods from before.

'The way open to us, which would suit us best, and the one I'm in favour of, is the one with our uncles from Nâirimô, who have embraced the same religion as us. And to make matters easier, our young cousin is right here with you in this school. You've surely had the chance to meet, and talk, the two of you. I've let both our fathers know about my opinion and my

coming here, and they didn't say anything against it. As far as our two mothers go, they are already rejoicing over the arrival of their niece that will happen soon. I also slipped in a word or two about it to Missi just now when we had a brief chat. He told me that he was very happy that we could combine some of the traditions of our ancestors with our new Christian beliefs.

'I'll tell you what really swayed me is the great respect we owe our maternal uncles. This feeling, this duty passed down from our ancestors, will be mine till the end of my days. We have been brought up to respect our traditions. We are not *popwaalé*. On no account must we forget that. All our values, all our alliances and customary ways are enshrined in this country, which our ancestors have bequeathed to us through the coconut trees and auracaria pines²⁶ rooted in their ancient plots of earth and which guide our faltering memory.

'Now it is our turn to pass on this heritage to our children and grandchildren so that they do not forget either. Why should we give up our customary laws and ancestral alliances? Do we really have no choice any more? Our elders keep on telling us that we are human beings, not wood and stone. We do not have to abandon our traditional values just because we pray to the new God. No. We have to be able to maintain them, one way or another, so as to pass them on to those who come after us.

'Dui, here I am still going on about all this. But what about you, what do you think of my proposal? Does it suit you or do you already know someone else, another girl here or back home?'

'No. To tell you the truth, I have not thought about it at all, big brother.'

'Well, that's right, and I can imagine that I'm coming stirring you up a bit with this, but anyway, do think about it,

'cause we'll talk it over again at the end of the year, when you're back home.'

'Yes, big brother.'

'I think we've already said a lot. Here in this little basket is some grated manioc and smoked fish for you from our two mothers, as well as a few trochus shells that the fishermen boiled. And I'm leaving you this scarf that the mother of our children²⁷ recently knitted. So I'll leave you now and go and have a word with Missi. We'll catch up again when you get back home.'

'Yes, see you again soon at home, big brother.'

During the hours after this memorable meeting, Dui searched for a way to break all this news to Nelly, the girl he'd been seeing at school for a few months. Their story had begun with discreet smiles, followed by an exchange of verbal messages, then with little notes written in the local language. The go-between was Alec, his best friend. All that had led to meetings at night in a clearing over on the mountain-side, which neither one of them had missed so far. Dui made up his mind to tell Nelly everything when they met the next night, as rumours flew around in that school as if they had wings and would have put her in the picture sooner or later anyway. Better take the bull by the horns, then. So, he faithfully related his big brother's visit. But he preferred not to reveal the name of the girl chosen by the clan. Nelly asked him only two questions:

'So you're going to marry one of your own from down there?'

'It's what our custom requires.'

'You won't be coming back next year, then?'

'No, if I have to get married, I won't be coming back here.'

They went back down to the school at the first crow of the cock. Nelly sobbed softly against Dui, who implored 'Ah!

Don't cry! Don't cry!', before letting her run off towards the girls' huts. He likewise went back to the boys' huts, his misty gaze masking illicit joys and silent suffering, as day was breaking.

One afternoon in December, during the final days of school, as he was going down towards the river, two girls were mucking about beneath the long green leaves of the banana trees by the track. One of them threw him two ripe pieces of fruit. Just as he went to pick them up, he caught the eye of his young cousin from back home.²⁸ In the evening, he met up with her again at the same spot.

Many years have passed ...

Now, under the shelter of niaouli tree skins, Dui Nâtêî tied his big brother's old torn scarf around his head before falling asleep over the photo of their four children.

Utê Mûrûnû, both milk sister and daughter by custom of Téa and Dui Nâtêî, spent a lot of time with one of the old grandmothers of the two brothers, a sister of their paternal grandfathers,²⁹ helping her with her daily chores on account of her rather advanced age. She had inherited her first names, which meant that in traditional kinship terms they were sisters. They lived on a craggy mound overlooking the main road, opposite the mouth of the river irrigating the land. That late afternoon, Nâtêî calmly climbed the steep narrow path leading to their house. Soon the roofs of the huts came into view like ridiculous headgear or precarious garments lining this rocky hill, a bed of dry straw, ferns and cut grass. Up above, by the old niaouli tree at the end of the climb, 'where one can breathe', to translate its Paicî name, he couldn't resist the call of the panorama below. With his right hand on the powdery and velvet-like trunk of the niaouli, and his left hand wiping

some beads of sweat from his forehead, he turned round to take it all in and admire it once more.

There, just below him, past the verdant top of the dragon-bloods³⁰ and the carefree tufts of the coconut trees on the shoreline, was the sea, a flat sea — the colour of coconut oil itself — imparting a sleek, picturesque quality to the mouth of the river. The sand bank opposite, which time and again had been reshaped, erased and recreated by bad weather, stretched out like an endless beach until disappearing at the navy blue wall of the headlands strung out towards the ocean. The horizon seemed to be the edge of a green or blue carpet, depending on the distance, the time and the weather, where three small islands drifted at the will of the waves, three coral atolls wandering at the whim of the winds.

In the other direction, towards the south, between the majestic tips of araucaria pines, you could make out the reddened crests of mining mountains overlooking the sea. To the west, the river meandered lazily towards the high valley, between the green, blue and grey slopes of the hills from which there rose at intervals a distant smoke, the barely perceptible sign of some human presence. Beneath the pale blue sky covering this whole luminous watercolour with its serenity, the insolent croaking of a crow, followed by the plaintive note of a turtle-dove, reminded Dui Nâtêi of the task entrusted to him by his customary brother.

He turned away as if with regret and headed quietly towards the elderly woman who was sitting on a straw mat unravelling the unruly knots of her hair, like those of a black-headed gull, with the blunt end of a bamboo comb.

'*Auu!*³¹ Here's our little father³² Nâtêi! Come here, little father, sit down here, next to your grandmother. You must be out of breath after your climb. Little sister dear! Bring the tea and grated manioc for our little father!'

‘Auu! Gèè! You’re still so strong, aren’t you?’³³

‘Öö! Little father! Don’t mock your grandmothers so, you naughty little thing, you!’

The conversation carried on for a minute in this playful tone between the old woman and the grandson, under the affectionate, smiling gaze of Utê Mûrûnû, kneeling in front of her milk brother as she laid out the plates, bowls, forks, spoons, sugar bowl and teapot. Then, between two mouthfuls of grated manioc and two spoonfuls of tea, Nâtê started on the reason for his visit.

‘Grandmother, I suppose you’ve both been told about what brings me to see you here at your place. You must know that both of us at Nâtê³⁴ have accepted the marriage proposal that has come from the other side. All that remains is for everyone to settle on the dates for gathering up our straw mats in the clan, and then for the others on the reserve to join us in going there. But it would be even better if, as far as possible, we could also have your response, from both of you, regarding the other proposal made by our uncles from over the mountain. That way, we could kill two birds with the one stone and make our work easier. So I’m here to listen to what you have to say about this and will pass on your decision to our elders, brothers, fathers and grandfathers. So, now you know why I’m sitting here with you today.’

‘Yes, little father, it’s quite true that we were expecting your visit and that we knew perfectly well the reason for it. We had even been discussing it a little between us. Let’s say that I have tried to find out what my little sister thought about it, to sound out her feelings, as is proper. And she has given me her answer. *Jènôôrí!*³⁵ Tell our little father what you really think deep down, go ahead and tell him what he must take back to the elders.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘You don’t want to what? To get married up there, or give your answer?’

‘I don’t want to get married up there.’

‘Have you really thought it all over, you two? Have you weighed up the pros and cons? You know that such a refusal would put us in a tricky, not to say downright embarrassing situation with respect to our uncles from over the mountains. Gèè, you know as well as I do what is behind a customary marriage. You know as well as I do what underlies alliances with the maternal cousins, especially ones with the cousins from over the mountains and across the river. So you can imagine the consequences of your decision for all of us, if it is final.’

‘Yes, that’s right. We’ve been told it all so often — from the time we were little kids — that I can’t pretend not to know it today. However, my decision is final. I won’t be getting married up there.’

‘Gèè, it’s possible that our brothers, fathers and grandfathers will ask me for an explanation of your refusal. In that case, I’d prefer to tell them what you yourself would have thought of saying. But, if you choose not to give your reasons, I’ll pass on your reply just as it is, believe me.’

‘Well, I’m going to set out clearly for you, here and now, the reasons for this refusal. But, considering where things have got to at present in this business, and taking account of our customary laws on speech and silence, those regulating what can and cannot be said, all this will remain between us. You’ll see how difficult it is to do otherwise. So that’s it, I won’t be going up there for at least three reasons, which is already much too much, since none of them can be spoken, seeing that it’s proper not to say or do anything that might ruffle the maternal relatives, and all the more so when one is a woman.

‘First of all, I don’t want people to decide my fate in a marriage which will continue to bind me and my family

for life, as well as all our children and their children until the very last. Customary marriage and its rituals strengthen the links decided in the past by our ancestors and guarantee them a future that is all mapped out and forced on to all our descendants. Like all our traditions, it involves the dead, the living, and those who will come after. But while it remains an immovable rock, it is no longer inevitable today. People have to be able to decide their lives and future for themselves and pass on to their children the right to choose responsibly. I am looking for a path around the rock.'

'*Auu! Jènôôrî!* Little sister, in that case, you'll need to be very brave, for if there surely are paths leading to where you want to go, the sharp ridges of the rock can cut and its crevices are merciless traps. So be very strong to be up to keeping to your choice and your quest!'

'Yes, I'll try as well as I can to trace out a path through the thorny bushes. I don't want to promise to spend the rest of my days with someone I hardly know, and I dare say that, despite all the pitfalls, I've got plenty of days left in my life yet. I know full well that many others before me, including you, big sister, have gone through this without dying from it. Many others still will live through it, but all I can say is that I don't even want to try. Just suppose, after marriage, one discovered an incompatibility with the other partner, making any idea of living together impossible, what could be done then? How could we take on problems day after day with someone who has simply been thrust upon us, problems we can't even talk about, as they are so difficult to admit to and share? And we couldn't be expected to take them on all by ourselves, could we?'

'You are right, little sister dear, it's as if there is a kind of unspoken taboo covering these questions which is quietly reapplied each time by those who make marriages. You have really chosen a steep path!'

‘Yes, big sister, and it’s a path that’s all the more dangerous in that the last reason for my refusing the proposal from the maternals up there is that I have met someone else I’m attached to.’

‘In that case, Gèè,’ said Dui, ‘I could have a word to the elders about it, so as to propose this as an alternative, which would possibly soften the impact of your refusal of the offer made by our maternal relatives from over the mountain.’

‘No, father,³⁶ that’s impossible! And, for that matter, I clearly warned both of you at the beginning that all of this will have to stay between us, because in fact it can’t be any other way now.’

‘If I follow you correctly, Gèè,’ interjected Dui, ‘you mean that this alternative could have been proposed at a particular time, but it’s now become pointless. Since when has it been a taboo subject?’

‘Since the two of you, at Nâtêî, gave your cousin to our maternals from over the river.’

‘But, why, Gèè, why?’

‘Because the one to whom you are going to give my little sister³⁷ is the father of the child I am carrying.’

That night, after Dui Nâtêî had left, the old woman, shaken by the revelations of her ‘younger sister’ and namesake, Utê Mûrûnû, told her, for the first time, the story of her life.

‘I am the daughter and granddaughter of warriors who had their heads cut off for rising up against the raids on their village by Whites. I lost my mother early on, sapped as she was by sorrow and haunted by the horrors of the repression. Every time she could escape she was drawn back to the place where, behind the mountain, my father and grandfather had been

killed. That was in the middle of a heat wave, at the edge of a watering hole that was almost empty, whose pebbles were to be washed and coloured by their blood all through the ensuing drought.

‘Sometimes, both day and night, my mother would lie her face down on those stones, as if she wanted to embrace, protect or take possession of them. She turned them over and over again, feeling their weight. She would talk to them, scold them, sing to them “*ae ae*”³⁸ She polished, stroked and cradled them. When the watering hole overflowed after the rains she spent hours if not whole days diving, swimming and bathing herself in it, as if she wanted to wash off who knows what mysterious taint. She came back each time completely exhausted by those strange walks up there to the watering hole, behind the barbed wire now surrounding this place that has become the private property of a cotton-grower.

‘She spoke less and less until eventually she settled into a muteness from which she would consent to come out only in the presence of the idolised stones, when she would rest in the tragic bed of the bloody watering hole. People took it that she no longer spoke to anyone but the “U”,³⁹ the nymphs or sprites of the place. They added that she was more and more haunted by those subversive creatures. In the end, the common view was that her mind had been completely disturbed by them. One morning, her body would be discovered, lying face down asleep on the stones. A pebble in each fist now clenched for ever, she was on the threshold of death as her stiffening feet were being washed in the waterhole one last time.

‘So it was that from that time on the responsibility for raising the orphan that I had become fell to my paternal grandmother, Utê Mûrûnû, whose first names I bore, just like you do today. Several images are superimposed in my memory each time she springs to mind. I think of the first cockcrow that wakes

us well before daybreak, the rays of the sun unfolding the red hibiscus flower in the morning dew, the log fire glowing in the hut and warming the blood. I also think of the spring nourishing the taro fields and the rainwater that enters our pores.

‘For me, she still represents all that is vital and alive. But one night, well before dawn, as we were preparing to go to a burial on a reserve a fair way off, pointing up to the star shining brightly above the waves, I told her just like that, “Gèè, there, I’ve got it, you are Kaatâdaa, the morning star!” She responded, her fingers gliding gently through my hair, in a voice in which I thought I could sense a great deal of restrained emotion, “No, my grandchild, we are both of us Utê Mûrûnû, the discreet coconut flower no one ever notices, as your grandfather used to like to sing”.

‘I still associate the memory of my grandmother with light, energy, life itself perhaps. For a long time, in the middle of the fields, at the edge of a beach, or between the straw and ferns of a niaouli tree hill, I would blink in the sun, my mouth as greedy as a baby’s frantically searching for the dark and firm point of her perspiring breasts. Maybe that’s also why I still can’t clearly distinguish between a grandmother and a mother, the two having completely merged in my mind.

‘She taught me to walk between a *buru taro*⁴⁰ that I had for sucking, a root of *magnagna*⁴¹ for chewing, a piece of *tué*⁴² for tasting or a coconut for drinking. She used to bathe me down there in the creek or, during the drought, at the spring under the old “taboo tree”,⁴³ where we would fetch water in carved-out coconuts with a woven handle that we carried slung over our shoulder.

‘She took care of my coughs, bouts of diarrhoea, fevers and other childhood sicknesses with leaves, bark and lianas. In the evening, around the fire, in the hut or the yard, she would tell me the legends or the history of the clan, or explain our

relations with the other clans, letting me know the exact kinship titles I had to use when addressing such and such a member, man or woman. As time went by, she initiated me into work in the fields, such as burning off, hoeing and weeding. She took a lot of time and patience to show me how to work the land, break up the earth and turn it over, then plough and prepare it for planting the yam and the taro, without forgetting the ritual gestures and words addressed to the rain, the moon, the wind and the sun.

‘Sometimes, when she burned a patch of dried grass or drove a stake into the ground, she would softly sing a lullaby. “*Auu!* Sleep in peace beneath the burning, little mother, you will have beautiful fruit”, or she would piously murmur as if in prayer: “*Auu!* Rest in peace beneath the wound, little mother, you will have beautiful children.” At first, thinking that she was talking to me, I used to be startled at these words and retorted, “But, I’m not sleeping, Gèè, I’m wide awake!” Then she would take up again, “No, little woman,⁴⁴ I’m not speaking to you, I’m invoking her, the other woman, the earth, the mother of us all, she who was, is and will be before and after us. Yes, I’m calling *her*, the earth, our mother and our grave, our life and death. There she is, warm, alive and vibrant, at our fingertips and beneath our footsteps! She has endured and will do again what no man has ever known. She has given birth and suckled, as no woman ever will. And a whole lifetime isn’t enough to give her back all that. We cannot but love her, pray to her and feel her. Can you hear her? She is here, answering us. Listen to her, she is singing, dancing and laughing! Yes, little woman, one day, you too will feel and hear her, one day perhaps, when I am gone, when she bears me within her, you will hear our shouts and cries and laughter. Then you will remember me and the earth.” It is perhaps since that time that, sometimes, alone in the fields, I hear the voices of the earth.

‘These voices of the earth, so my grandmother Utê Mûrûnû taught me, were none other than those of a mother, of a woman. And they spoke first and foremost to us women who, better than anyone, could understand them. Bearers of seed, we were burdened with proscriptions, branded by taboos that were like so many rocks put in the way of our lives. As the habitual paths of pleasure, we became Eves bitten by the snake invented by the priests of the new religion. As *Adi*,⁴⁵ black pearls of customary marriage, we were exchanged like so many pieces of pottery sealing an alliance in between two wars. Treated as ways and byways between clans, we survived as best we could our childhood and puberty, too often raped by lecherous old men. Prestige, virility, warfare — male concepts for the great hut of men built on the broad backs of women! Sharing, solidarity, humility — women’s words conceived, nourished and borne in the entrails of us beaten women!

‘*Auu!* You already know it, little sister, this world erected on our womb, our arms, our head, this universe living like a parasite off our body, is nothing but a trap, forcing us into submission. But it is also just as true, little mother, that all men are nothing if not our sons! And if we didn’t ask to come into the world, if we didn’t choose to be born women, we have only one life, here and now, so let’s try at least to live it instead of suffering it! Let’s walk in the footsteps of our legendary Kanak princess Kaapo⁴⁶ who, at great personal risk and against all the odds, carved a way forward for herself! Let us all be Kaapos!

‘Little sister, we are soon going to leave this place, both of us, I for ever and you for a few years. You won’t see me die, or bury me, or mourn for me far off, and as for me, I have nothing to leave you but our hours spent together, our shared chores and our laughter stolen from the inevitability of time. I have nothing to bequeath to you, little mother, other than my voice that is running out of breath, the toothless words

of the stories of my life or the story of my lives. So listen to them, listen to it, for the first and last time, so as to tell it one day to your granddaughter, our future Utê Mûrûnû, whom you will so name in memory of us!

‘Soon after the return to the earth of our grandmother Utê Mûrûnû, who passed away at the very beginning of last century, our fathers and grandfathers went with me to our maternal relatives’ over the mountain to offer me to one of our old polygamous cousins, and so I became his youngest wife. Although our grandmother had taught me many things about a woman’s life, I had barely reached puberty, and no boy had yet come up to me. So the grandmothers, aunts and older sisters, all the first wives who were there, took on the task of completing my education.

‘I was the last to enter the women’s hut, but I was also there as a child, a mouth and two more arms. The other wives fed me, got rid of my lice and generally looked after me. They gave me the daily chores to do, took me to the fields, instructed me in the art of weaving and basket-making, and taught me the stories of the clan and the songs and dances of women. It was the oldest of them, whom I loved because she reminded me of Gèè Mûrûnû, who went with me at night into our great cousin’s hut. As she was leaving the others, she called across to them softly with a smile, “The two of us are going to finish our stories up there” or “We’re going to play, up there” or again “The rest of you stay here, because the two of us are going up there to rub their backs”. They replied from under stifled laughter, “Yeah, that’s right. You tell us all about that bit tomorrow!.” “Yes, but be careful of dangerous games!” and “Make sure you do a good job rubbing the backs of the elders, up there, lest they crush us all!”.

“Up there” did not mean in this instance the great hut of the men, but another, smaller one, a little lower down and to the side, where our husband could receive us for a chat, discuss clan matters concerning women such as the education or marriage of children, and, at night, for the rest. My nocturnal visits with the first wife were rather spread out at first, then became more and more frequent until that evening when she abandoned me a few steps from the entrance with the words, “Woman, the moment has come when I must leave you, but we’ll meet up again tomorrow.” I was dumbfounded and stammered out mechanically, “Yes, see you tomorrow, big sister”, as she was already stealing off, merging into the night in which the sparks of the firebrand, which she stirred with her outstretched arm in order to light the way, fell like fireflies. “Up there”, or rather right here in front of me, lovely little flames were warming the old man who kept the fire going with his heels in the ashes as he puffed on his pipe and set his headdress straight. My stomach twisted with fear, giving me wings, and I fled without further ado.

‘The dawn found me asleep in the foetal position between two roots of an old banyan⁴⁷ tree, in the vicinity of a reserve in the upper valley where some of my father’s sisters were living. One of the tiny pieces of fruit from the age-old tree fell on my cheek and brought me out of a nightmare in which Gèè Utê Mûrûnû and I were running at breakneck speed along the track by the river, fleeing a couple of old men who seemed to spell the end of us. My aunts welcomed me into their place and so it was that, quite naturally, over the years, one of their sons and I took to going together to fish for prawns or sow the fields and, one fine day, cut straw for our first hut as newly weds. We would have two sons, the birth of the younger one

taking place only many years after his brother's. This meant that their father would more often take the older one with him for customary meetings with our kinfolk from the valley or the coast.'

'Very early one morning, at the first cockcrow, with Kaatâdaa still shining brightly, they left us to go to a big *pilou*⁴⁸ over the mountains. Our elder boy went off with a simple, "See you some day, Mum", while his younger brother, just waking up, was rubbing his eyes and holding on to his legs, sobbing "*Iũ!*"⁴⁹ I want to go with you! I want to go with you!" It was said at the time that such and such a priest was once again invoking the stone of war, and such and such other tying the vine of war. But I hardly thought about those sounds of war myself, especially as many of our men had already been fighting for a while against Wilhelm's soldiers,⁵⁰ very far away over there, beyond the sea, in the land of the *popwaalé*. What I feared for our first son, who was coming up to adulthood, was that he might be tempted by this new curse in a bottle, this poisoned water that slowly destroyed the body. Indeed, alcohol was something else that was wreaking havoc on our people then, carrying off a lot of our men.'

'They never returned from the big *pilou* over the mountains, although I certainly did see my son again, thanks once more to Gèè Utê Mûrûnû. She came in a dream to warn me that, badly wounded by the white soldiers' bullets, he had taken refuge under an old hoop-tree⁵¹ in the forest. I found him dying there,

but a faint light in his misty eyes and a sad smile on his chapped lips proved to me that he recognised me. He passed away in my lap, and I will never know for how long I stayed there cradling his head against my naked breast and sobbing in his hair. Then I set up a bed for him out of straw, moss and ferns between the roots of a nearby banyan tree, after first carefully laying his body on the ground within the protective spathe of a cabbage-tree palm. Before giving him up to the forest and the earth, I placed a dead branch in the shape of a bird's beak between his fingers, entreating my deceased fathers and grandfathers, his maternal relatives, to accompany him to the hut of the warriors.

'Then came the time of repression⁵² with its attendant train of ignominy, betrayal and baseness. What remained of the tribe, that is the women, children and old men, was caught between two lines of fire. The colonial troops went up the valley on one side and crossed over the mountain on the other, guided by their local collaborators. To my mind, the latter had the face of submission, indignity and ignorance. I could not figure out the reasons for their actions and I do not believe that I will ever understand them. The *popwaalé* did nothing but continue to send us to a slow or immediate death in that war, just as in the early days of their settlement here and as they still do today. But those traitors, how could they walk, sit or dream with impunity over the unburied corpses of their fathers and grandfathers, their children and mothers? That question still remains unanswered for me.

'They shared out the booty, which consisted of us widows and our children, and took us back into our respective tribes. Three of my cousins from the valley preferred suicide. What kept me alive was my second son. We came back here with one of the wildest of them, and on the way I made a silent promise to Gèè Mûrûnû, my alter ego, that from that day on

I would soak the abortifacient weed at each new moon. Shortly afterwards, my sleep often became haunted by the same nightmare in which a decapitated head was rolling at my feet, although refusing at first to show me its face. Weary with war, one afternoon before taking a rest, I invoked Gèè Utê Mûrûnû, and during my nap the head turned over, clearly revealing the features of my departed cousin and husband. Furthermore, his face was resting this time on something on which drops of blood were drying. It was a cavalryman's sabre, the gift of a French officer to a zealous auxiliary — the man whose hut and bed I was now sharing.

'From then on, I never stopped carrying out in my mind the task that fell to me, to fulfil my last promise to Gèè Utê Mûrûnû. But I had to wait, to suffer and brood on my hatred a good dozen years, until the time came for my younger son to be taken back up home by his maternal relatives together with his young wife and some pine and coconut trees,⁵³ thereby opening up the path for him to a peaceful, normal future.

'One night, three moons later, as we were coming back from a funeral, just the two of us on a raft, my companion of misfortune slipped, lost his footing and drowned right there, down in the "sharks' hole",⁵⁴ where his maternal uncles were to throw his sword before removing the rest of his belongings.

'Such were the vicissitudes of my life! And now you, new Utê Mûrûnû, who inherit the name of our grandmother and my own, too, you have also just refused to follow the customary path proposed by your two elder brothers, that of the alliance of our fathers and grandfathers with our maternal relatives. So take good care of yourself, for you know what you are exposing yourself to, especially in your condition.⁵⁵ But our little father Nâtêi, their spokesman, won't tell them anything of your confession. He won't let on about it to anyone, in accordance with our law of silence.

‘As for me, I will soon be taking our new secret, like all the others, with me to the grave. So don’t be afraid of anything — all men are merely our children, little mother! Fear not, even if our son must come into the world far from the sea air, far from the fleeting lace of the foam and the eternal waltz of the waves. Yes, the time has come for both of us Utê Mûrûnûs to part, since you will go off tonight. Your son will be born in the great forest, where mine is sleeping, on a mat made of straw, moss and ferns. The warbling of the notou,⁵⁶ the sobbing of the tortoise and the murmur of the river will be his lullaby. Give him the name Dui Nâtê in memory of our grandfather, our first-born, who is resting up there, and in remembrance of our little father, the spokesman for silence. And think sometimes of me, of both of us, whenever you come across the discreet and tiny yellow flower of the coconut tree, little sister in whom and through whom we will survive, Gèè Utê Mûrûnû and I!’

Utê Mûrûnû was the first to jump from the dusty rear of the pick-up truck and she held out her arms to help her son, a young boy of about 10, to get down. She said goodbye with thanks to the white driver who had picked them up in the midday sun along the coast, before she and her son headed off to the shade of the old tree in the village. They took a little breath before climbing up the track through the coffee plantation to the reserve. Utê Mûrûnû was going to show it to her son when a man emerged, walking briskly. He was elegantly dressed in the shirt and kaki shorts of the ‘Volunteers’⁵⁷ for the *popwaalé*’s Second World War, which was drawing to a close. He came towards them with a smile, and it was then that she recognised him.

She had not seen him since those distant afternoons in the dawa season when, stretched out beneath the flowering

melochia bush, they enjoyed themselves checking the five pink petals and five yellow stems before slipping a corymb behind one another's ear. Once, as if to safeguard their romance, they had spat out a few of these yellow heart-shaped leaves at each other. On one of their chaotic nights on the sand, behind the trunk of a coconut tree gnarled by the sea, they had confided their passion to a polished cowrie before throwing it into the moon-tide, as if in a call to witness. Since that night of the elderly Utê Mûrûnû's confidences, when she departed hastily, these memories had begun to vanish from her mind.

After the customary greetings, he sat down next to them, and she asked about news from home. Like everywhere else, the war and the arrival of the Americans had turned their habits on their head, transformed the landscape and left a legacy of unexpected children in the tribal villages, at the same time as it took our own men, women, children and adolescents of both sexes out. The departure of the few local Japanese shopkeepers and fishermen,⁵⁸ the allegations of those who had supposedly seen American soldiers parading Japanese skulls around as a trophy or ashtray, had, in addition to the daily propaganda of the *popwaalé*, reinforced the general psychosis about an imminent Japanese landing. Many thought that their days were numbered and took life by the horns.

So it was that several women, married as well as single, ran off with the Americans, going from one camp to another before ending up on the streets of Noumea. A few came back to leave their babies with their grandparents before returning with the soldiers or dying of untreated venereal disease, like Utê Mûrûnû's younger sister, whom the man now sitting next to them had previously married according to the laws of custom and whose widower he now found himself.

But there were also those whom the turmoil of war had not really shaken, the guardians, both men and women, of the

traditions, who continued to tend the customary plot of land, and those who had lived through it all before, like the returned soldiers of World War I. Some considered this conflict to be just one more scourge in the cohort of evils imported by the *popwaalé* who, besides the expropriation of lands, the head tax and the forced labour, really never seemed to stop being parasites on us.

In turn, Utê Mûrûnû told her former lover briefly about her existence since he had left. Shortly after taking off up into the high valley, she followed a cousin from the other side of the mountains, whose parents showered her with so much care and consideration that she gradually came to forget her heartbreaks. As the months went by, she let herself be pampered by her new family, just like her son did, as if in this way she was getting back a little of her own childhood. She experienced those years as a time of grace in a family cocoon, which took the edge off her fractious spirit and knocked the rebelliousness out of her. She was happy with a situation into which a deliberate choice had led her, even though she might not yet have found an occasion to show her true spirit. She seemed to have locked away the old woman's words and her past refusals in some remote part of her memory right up until the outbreak of the war.

In fact, this was the time when, within the space of a few months, her companion lost both his parents and in which Utê Mûrûnû unleashed the energy that had been dormant in her for so long. She plunged right into her domestic and social responsibilities, taking her role as spouse, teacher and household manager head on, as well as her duties according to custom and her religious activities. Then, with other youths from the region, her companion joined up with the Pacific Battalion.⁵⁹ In doing so, he freed himself from her sway, but, having understood for a long time that only her own

death would prevail over Utê Mûrûnû, he went off to die in peace before his time and for no good reason, over there in the icy lands of the *popwaalé*.⁶⁰ From then on, she decreed that it was up to her alone to judge what would be the best for her son's future. So she opted for their return to her reserve, on account of the nearby school. And so another prediction of her grandmother's came to pass.

The young boy's eyes followed the widower for a long time as he walked away. He turned back with an impish grin to give him a slight wave of his hand. As his mother then asked him, just for fun, if he recognised him, he replied in the most perfectly natural way, 'Yes, that's Dad, and it was you, Mum, who told me!' She mused that it was surely the old woman who, appearing with her own features and disguised in her clothes, had once again stamped her mark on the child's dreams. But she did not say anything, just like three years before, when, having asked him in the same playful tone where his first name came from, she heard him reply: 'My name is Dui Nâtêî, the same as his who's sleeping up there in the forest, and you know it full well, Mum, since you were the one who told me!', whereas no such thing had occurred. A little later in the afternoon, they finally went up the track to the reserve in the company of female relatives who were so happy to see Utê Mûrûnû again.

After putting their flowers in a white tin, while her son's attention was being taken up with the squawking flight of parakeets over by the erythrina bush, Utê Mûrûnû remained lost in thought before the grave of the old laughing gull. There, at the back of their former yard, among the niaouli trees, she remembered her last words, especially those telling her what lay in store for her, and which had now come to pass. She saw herself once more, one-month pregnant, walking along the river at the first cockcrow in the light of Kaatâdaa, in the

footsteps of her rebellious ancestor, she who had been there 30-odd years before. 'He will be our first child, so all the more reason for us to go home together, up there, to prepare for his coming.' On the eve of their departure to the other side of the mountains, her young companion⁶¹ made this response to the announcement of her condition in a gay but decisive tone, casting his smooth and round pebbles into the stream as he did so. It now came flooding back to her with the evocative power of a voice from the past. Her nostalgia-filled gaze darted from the coral-covered, flowering tumulus with large stones along its side to a sparrow hopping on to the branches of a niaouli tree, before becoming expressionless at the poignant memory of her delivery in the forest.

The images of that distant morning of the birth of her son, which the old woman had predicted, then broke through the shackles of her memory to flash irresistibly across her mind. Her companion's mother and she were burning stumps and roots on a plot of land in preparation for a banana tree plantation down by the river. Between her groans, her mother-in-law's encouragement and the first cries of her baby, she had briefly glimpsed the happy face of the old python priestess and clearly made out the song of the notou, the lament of the turtle-dove and the splashing of the water. Her aunt⁶² had cut the umbilical cord with the blade of her machete, which she had run through the fire, and applied to the new-born child's navel a paste made out of three coagulating leaves she had crushed with her teeth, before swaddling him in her old gunny-bag. Clenching his tiny fists, he had carried on crying, there on the bank, while his aunt took his mother gently into the water for a wash and to slide the placenta over the stones before burying it in a spot where a stump had been previously dug out. Enraptured, she had then picked up her grandson Dui Nâtêi to cradle him, exhorting him with a soft 'Wééé!⁶³ Dui Nâtêi, man

of the forest, is now going to return home to awaken his peers still sleeping at the back of the hut!’

A pressing call from her son, fascinated and intrigued by the noisy chirping and coloured plumage of the parakeets on the flowering erythrina, dragged Utê Mûrûnû out of her memories. And, before beginning to clear the ground of what had previously been the yard, in order to get it ready for their settling in again, she noticed it, lying there at her feet in front of the grave — the little pale yellow flower of the coconut tree!

My parents have been living in Noumea since the Sixties. Encouraged by my paternal grandmother, Utê Mûrûnû, who looked after me at that time until the end of primary school, they came here to seek work in what was known as the ‘boom time’.⁶⁴ Like most of those of his generation then living on customary lands, my father, Dui Nâtêi, went back and forth a good deal at first in the buses of the barge company, the *Société du Chalandage*, as a casual waterside worker. Then, by turns, he was a gardener, manual labourer, fisherman, bricklayer and delivery man, before being taken on for good as a worker at the Doniambo⁶⁵ nickel plant. As for my mother, Pwiaa,⁶⁶ she began by planting lettuces with an elderly Vietnamese woman, then cleaned houses on a half-day or full-day basis before finally coming across bosses who did not reduce her to moonlighting.

At first they spent some time at an aunt’s place in a dilapidated hotel over in the Vallée du Tir,⁶⁷ whose decrepit hovels of rooms surrounded a yard that was raucous and action-packed, especially at weekends. Its centrepiece was a cracked washbowl mounted by a small damaged statue, which must have once been a fountain. We paid them a first visit, which

was more than enough for my grandmother to declare intolerable the promiscuity of that area where, according to her, no one knew who was who any more.

My parents moved into the dampness of the cellar of a large colonial house in the Faubourg Blanchot,⁶⁸ which was often closed up and which my father looked after, just as he tended to the garden's shrubs and flowers. My grandmother took me there once and, although liking the roses, gerberas and carnations, she deplored the fact that people could tolerate stooping so low, drinking, eating and sleeping under the urine and excrement of those who, above, took care of all their bodily needs on top of us, 'over our heads', as she used to say trenchantly in our tongue. They next occupied a shack made out of sheets of corrugated iron over towards Sainte-Marie,⁶⁹ where you could hardly move between a small spring bed, a crate used as a sideboard, a linen basket, a shelf and a primus stove. Grandmother would not go inside, snarling as she took the dust off her thongs that, after crossing half the country to see her children, she preferred to sleep at a relative's place rather than suffocate in that rat hole. Later, although she was forever complaining about the street noise there, we went to visit my parents more often in their downtown bed-sitter and kitchenette, before I moved in with them again during my high school years, in the house that they would end up buying in the suburb of Rivière Salée.⁷⁰

Bearing in mind the respect that they both owed her, and doubtless from fear of her outbursts, my parents made a point of sending me back to my grandmother's every school holiday. For her part, very much as during the earlier years of my childhood with her, she made it a matter of honour to

impart to me what neither my parents nor books could ever teach me about our roots and history, what makes us who we are. She did this, she would insist, so that I would not have to look the other way or lower my head or change the subject like a lot of our relatives did, when my own children would later want to know more. She used to correct my speech with the appropriate Paicî words and expressions whenever I stuffed my sentences with their French equivalents. She would finish our nursery rhymes and legends of old times by relating to me our mythical stories or singing our poems. And so, right from the start, I learnt to recognise our various narrative genres by their rhythm and musicality.

Working in the field was the opportunity for her to show me our nutritious plants and tell me their names, or point out those we no longer ate as well as the ones that had been imported. She reminded me how our ancestors used to plant in the old days according to the lunar calendar, and she taught me the cycle of the seasons, the symbolism of the taro and the yam⁷¹ and a respect for taboos.

‘The woman to whom a child is born every year gets worn out. She must be allowed to breathe, just as the fallow field is the earth’s rest. Burning off will rouse it at the right time for it to bear beautiful fruit,’ she would murmur while scraping the clods of earth from the round lump of a yam sap.

I would be fascinated by the agility of her wrinkled fingers as they moulded the young leaves of a coconut tree into a weathercock or a children’s ball, a basket for shells at low tide or for bulbs from the fields. I would be surprised by their speed in criss-crossing the dried, smooth and malleable fringes while weaving bags or mats. Their skill in sliding the sharp end of a pocket-knife over the sides and down the middle of the long green pandanus leaf to remove the stingy bits and cut it up would amaze me. Then their speed in wrapping the resulting

blades around the outstretched joined thumb and middle finger, before turning them into lovely natural earrings for drying, would mesmerise me. 'Wééé! Gèè, how do you do that?' I would call out. 'I watched and touched and, as time went by with Utê Mûrûnû, I did it myself, just as you will.'

The same fingers contained the same palliative virtues for a boil, a bout of diarrhoea or for putting a badly positioned foetus back into place. Working alone, at one time the thumb explored a feverish brow, and at another, joined to the forefinger, it softened the leaves up. While only the tips of the fingers were needed to spread sap over the affected skin, all the energy of the entire hand was required for gynaecological care. My grandmother could detect the incubation of VD by touch. She would show me the kind of medicinal leaves, vines, bark and roots needed before sending me off all over the place in search of them, whether around our yard, up in the hills, by the side of a creek, in the mangroves or down by the sea.

The regular coming and going of many men and women, often with their children, to consult my grandmother enabled me to get to know our close relatives and others who were more distant, on my father's and mother's side. In fact, she was always introducing me to people. And there were no lack of occasions, as she would take me with her to customary or religious meetings, to fairs and other places where people got together, or simply when she went shopping in the European village. 'So that you can easily tell who is who, Utê Mûrûnû!' she would say time and again to me.

One afternoon when I was going on 15, about the middle of the Seventies, two cousins from our tribe⁷² came up from Noumea, with some other young people, to hold a political

meeting in the communal house. They set about explaining the objectives of their movement, which called for the unconditional return of all our lands that had been plundered by colonisation, and how they intended to organise the struggle for the country's independence. As we were saying goodbye to them outside, I heard my grandmother giving strong encouragement to the two cousins. Not everyone agreed with her, such as the uncle with whom we walked back, who had the misfortune to proclaim: 'These youngsters would be better off working instead of hanging about and telling their parents what to do ...'

She cut him off with the retort: 'Hah? Because for you, this isn't work, going all over the country to rouse people from their slumber? And what do you mean about "telling what to do"? Anyone would think that you didn't understand a single word of what they said to us! And for that matter, why did you keep your mouth shut just now instead of showing them what you're made of? You're just one of those blokes who've only got the guts to speak up in front of women or when they've had their fill of plonk. You turn your back on your children, sound important only in front of an old woman and get drugged out on booze to spit on your brothers. You're one of those who lap up the sweat from under the *popwaalés*' armpits, where they love to take shelter; one of those who get drunk on their piss and stuff themselves on their shit.⁷³ But I won't say any more, 'cause we haven't drunk from the same spring or eaten from the same pot. Stay here and wait for the others, as my granddaughter and I are going on ahead!'

Then she called to me, 'Come, my little one, let's go! Let's leave the lifeless stone and dead wood by the roadside! The young people are right. We didn't give up our lands; the *popwaalé* took them by stealth or by force, for a bottle of spirits or through the barrel of a gun. We resisted from the word go, so

they executed or exiled our leaders, and later they rigged them out with an army cap and stripes like puppets or soldiers in an operetta. They massacred our tribes before plonking us down on reserves like pigs or animals in a zoo. They only opened up the barbed-wire fences of their paddocks to us in order to enslave us with forced labour and make us pay the head tax.⁷⁴ They opened up their Bible to us so as to mesmerise us more effectively, block our memory and wipe us out.

‘We think we still have all our wits about us, and our spirits with us,⁷⁵ although we are being constantly bombarded with their mirages. I’m telling you, my little one, my whole life long I’ve sung their hymns and prayed to their God, but up till now, all I’ve seen fall from the sky are drops of rain. And it is our kin I invoke to cure our own kind, as Utê Mûrûnû taught me, for they are here in us, and not in some kingdom in the heavens. Our gods, like our dreams, are born and die with us. Only the earth remains. It doesn’t laugh, yet we laugh for it. It doesn’t sing, yet we sing for it. It doesn’t dance, yet we dance for it. It doesn’t cry, yet we cry for it. It doesn’t speak, yet we speak for it. It doesn’t die, yet we die for it.

‘Don’t you see, my granddaughter, the earth’s voices that our elder, Utê Mûrûnû, used to tell me about are the ones her life and the lives of her people have sown and given birth to in her. As to the earth, it lives its own life, with or without us. We need it; it doesn’t need us. We cannot live without it, and yet we are bleeding it a little more each day. We imagine it in our likeness so as not to see our vital dependence on it and on the sun, but deep down we know full well that in the end we are the ones who lose out in this. The earth, the sun and the universe move without us. But we don’t want to admit it, so we manufacture gods or a God the almighty creator of all things. We are supposed to be in dialogue with them and yet act as their elected or appointed spokesmen and prophets.

‘All we do in this is lie a little more to ourselves, whereas the slightest bit of humility or decency would force us all to doubt, to see clearly our common misery in the face of the earth’s implacability, the indifference of time, the silence of the world and the inevitability of death. No, instead of all that, some people bestow on themselves the privilege of taking away from others their right to life, to the land, to a country, in the name of one or many imaginary gods, or by dint of the colour of their skin. In hearing me speak, you must be wondering, my granddaughter, why then do I still go to mass every Sunday. Well, to tell you the truth, I go less to pray to a God I have never met than to share in the communion with our own people. For none of us could live without the land or our own kind.

‘The basic values of our customary way of life that our elders have left to us are those of exchange, solidarity and sharing. Always keep them within you, little mother, don’t give them up at any price! You will need them for the long road ahead of you, both you and those who came today to reawaken the country. For as sure as you bear my name, Utê Mûrûnû, we are part of them, and you will join them. As for me, my days are fast disappearing, but you and all those of your generation will be with them, whether you want to or not, for the country belongs to you, and you can’t do anything about that. The movement will be unleashed over the whole country like a wave sweeping you all up. I know, because last night my big sister and elder came and found me, first alone on the mountain, as a huge tidal wave was drowning our island. Then Dui Nâtê sobbed at our feet, but it wasn’t my son, it was yours, my granddaughter. You see, this dream is clear, little mother, you will be one of them much faster than you think, you will have a son with one of them, whom you will call Dui Nâtê, like my own son, like your father. So, be strong, my granddaughter! Be strong, Utê Mûrûnû!’

I was a little shaken by my grandmother's words, when we reached the top of the little climb leading up to our place, 'where you can breathe'. There, between two dead leaves on the track, I picked up the tiny pale yellow flower of the coconut tree! Without a word, I clasped it in the palm of my right hand, convinced that she, our forebear, was definitely there, walking with us along the path, to back up the advice of my grandmother and confirm her predictions. That night, as grandma, overcome by sleep or twirling in some nocturnal escapade with her forebear, was snoring peacefully, I tossed and turned at the other end of our 'Berliet' bed⁷⁶ raised up on bamboo, possessed by the limpid look of one of the young speakers that afternoon, who had slipped me one last tract before they left.

As he was responsible for contacting his kinsmen with a view to beginning to organise them in Noumea, it was only natural that he called by the house, with two of his friends, one Saturday afternoon. My parents kept them until early evening, when they let me go with them to their meeting. Little by little, I entered their circle. One night, after a *bougna*⁷⁷ sale for the organisation, which took place at the other end of town, he walked me back home by the shortest way, across the hills, where the dawn surprised us. I carried on as best as I could at school before starting work as a relief teacher in a suburb of Noumea. Like most young couples, we lived with my parents, who were just as supportive as I was of my companion's activities.

Our son, Dui Nâtêî, arrived a little like the last-born, the baby of the household and, of course, the most spoiled. He became more their baby and their child than ours, just as I had been more my grandmother's than theirs. But we made up our minds to take him as often as possible also to his father's family. So it was for his first three years. Afterwards, I wanted to set us

free from the paternal cocoon by taking my companion to live elsewhere, in our own place, a bed-sit.⁷⁸ For my parents, of course, it was out of the question that we take Dui with us, and so we didn't even dare mention it to them. We did not have another child together, as our relationship became shaky and we went our separate ways without too much trouble.

Utê Mûrûnû, my grandmother, whom I had abandoned somewhat during those years, watched over me. Knowing that I was alone, in other words without a child or companion, she came to let me know that she was expecting me up there, under the niaouli trees, among the straw, ferns and cutting grass on the hillside. I joined her the year before the start of the 'events'⁷⁹ that, in her way, she had previously predicted to me. I sometimes took her with me to the meetings of the struggle committee,⁸⁰ always to her delight. At harvest time, she especially liked to bring me out a dish of yams or ripe bananas into the big coffee field that she had planted for my children and me. When her maternal relatives were finally to come for her, it was her cousin from over the mountain, the widower in khaki who greeted her on his return, the one whom she had rejected, my grandfather, my father's father, who delivered the funeral oration.

There she rests, at the back of the yard, beside her big sister and elder Utê Mûrûnû, in accordance with her last wishes. Last night, I dreamed of a little girl who showed me her sweet face, there, among the niaouli trees. This little girl looked like me, but it wasn't me. Dui Nâtêi, my son, has just rung me to say

that his companion's ultrasound has announced a girl to whom both think they will give my names. She was the one who came last night! It was her, Utê Mûrûnû! But which one of us all, finally?

The Cordyline⁸¹

There now, someone just asked me who she was and I replied that she was the sister-in-law of the grandson of the old man who had left. Why this roundabout way of referring to someone? After all, where I come from, we have lots of ways of designating a particular person. I could have said that she is the mother of, and mentioned her eldest son, or she is the wife of, and named her husband, or again that she is the grandmother of, and added the first name of her first grandson, or used many other expressions common in our language.⁸² She who asked me now repeated a satisfied, ‘Ah, yes, yes, I see’, and I remembered that while signs of customary life were always intense moments of sharing, communication and communion for us, they were also a meeting place, an occasion for getting to know each other.

Her name is something I discovered and deciphered with great difficulty, at the age of 10, in an old illustrated *Petit Larousse*,⁸³ which was lying about at my aunt and uncle’s place, the first time I came into this village community.⁸⁴ No, she is not a famous person; she had quite simply put her given and maiden names on the back cover of the dictionary. They were carefully engraved with beautiful letters straight out of the model script that the teacher used to trace for us on the blackboard at school and that so fascinated me. This identity,

lying dormant there in the book with threadbare pages like a jewel in its box, struck my child's imagination. Just who could this lady be — for it could only be a lady, it didn't occur to me that it could be a girl — who could write her name so perfectly?

I asked my aunt about it and she told me who her clans were, on the paternal and maternal sides, and how we were related through kinship. She also mentioned that a few months before, pregnant to one of our common maternal cousins, the girl had had to leave her parents, school and village all of a sudden to join that particular cousin who had found a job in Noumea. This was to avoid a scandal⁸⁵ on account of her situation as a 15-year-old schoolgirl and to escape the wrath of her future mother-in-law, who told her that she didn't want to have her as a daughter-in-law, as she had other marriage prospects for her eldest son. It was also to protect her love by setting up a family with the father of her child.

My aunt went on to say that this young niece had been right to fight for what she judged to be her happiness and her future, as parents and grandparents would just have to understand and come to accept more and more that the times were changing and that they could no longer simply impose a customary marriage on all their offspring. She ended with the hope that the mother-in-law would have less trouble with her second son, who was then in high school in Noumea. The way he applied himself to his work, his warm generosity and mischievous sense of humour, which were features he had inherited from his grandfather who had raised him and whose name he bore, were already appreciated by everyone in the village community.

I just couldn't imagine that such an artistically written name could harbour such heartbreaks and give rise to such thoughts in my aunt. These beautifully written letters certainly concealed a very complicated story for my 10-year-old's

understanding, and so I quickly tucked them away somewhere in a drawer in my mind.

This drawer was only opened three years later when, coming out of a shop where I and a classmate had tried to get hold of the uniform required for our P.E. classes at school — navy blue shorts, white top, tennis or basketball shoes, short white socks — we met her in the rue Georges Clemenceau.⁸⁶ My friend greeted her with a kiss and introduced me straight away by telling her that we were from the same part of the country. All smiles, she embraced me in turn, explaining to my friend that I was her little sister.⁸⁷ She gave us a few coins for our bus, as she put it, before hurrying off towards the Place des Cocotiers⁸⁸ in search of a taxi. She was pregnant, and held her first child by the hand, a little three-year-old who bore the first name of his paternal great-grandfather.⁸⁹ I turned round to follow them with my eyes. A thick plait at the back of her neck was just visible past the collar of a chestnut woollen jumper with long puffy sleeves that the young mum wore over a pale yellow dress. She was nearing the level of the fountain with the statue of Céleste on top.⁹⁰

While my friend talked about how she had come to know her in the communal yard in front of the house of one of her aunts, a neighbour, I was wondering if my mother would allow me to go and visit her one Saturday, as she had just proposed to me. My friend was singing the praises of her generosity and kindness when we reached the rue de l'Alma and she blurted out, 'It's funny. The first time I saw you, I thought of her. It's true. I wondered whether you weren't her little sister. Afterwards, when the roll was called, I heard your name but didn't think any more about it.' Just then, we ran into a group of students, one of whom greeted us, and when he caught up with the others, my friend said, 'What do you know, he's another boy from your area, none other than her

brother-in-law! I met him down at her and my aunt's place. Just now, you heard her tell us to drop by and see them from time to time. We'll do it, huh, one Saturday afternoon, what do you say? Ask your mother, okay?" I agreed with delight. I now had a personally autographed portrait to go with the name inscribed in a schoolgirl's beautiful handwriting and daintily put away somewhere at the back of a drawer.

When I mentioned her to my mother, she told me about our customary relations and confirmed that these did indeed allow me to refer to her by the kinship name of big sister in line with our traditions. One Saturday afternoon, as promised, she was happy to let me go and pay her a visit and entrusted me with a bag containing a piece of cloth wrapped around a bank note for her.⁹¹ Seeing me raise my eyebrows, she recommended that I simply offer it to my big sister as soon as I arrived at her place as a way of greeting her, and she would understand. That's indeed how it worked out when my friend and I found her sitting, legs outstretched on a mat, under the mango tree at the back of their yard. One hand was on her tummy as the other was pushing a small pram to entertain her little one. They were alone, as our two cousins had gone out. Her companion, the elder one, was with a group of his buddies, while his brother, who was still at school, was watching a football match with a mate. It was often like that on my subsequent visits, too.

During the course of these Saturday afternoons, she gradually came to regard me as a real confidante. She showed me photos of herself as a young girl, then as a teenager, and ones of the family and the in-laws up country. Born of an unknown father, she had been raised by her maternal grandmother. Later, she had been a faithful visitor at her mother and stepfather's house, which rang out to the shouts, cries and laughter of her younger brothers and sisters. One

night when there was a fair, the first crow of the cock surprised her at the river's side, below her grandmother's place, in the company of the future father of her children, who had approached her the previous day through another cousin acting as go-between for the occasion. The beau, who had come from Noumea where he worked, was only passing through, but made the promise, among other declarations, to come back for her. It was this promise, and later the old grandfather's words of encouragement, that enabled her to resist the forces which were going to gang up against her in the following months.

The rumour-mongers murmured that the chap had made other conquests in Noumea, in the tribe and elsewhere, and that he even had one or two children somewhere or other; in short, that he was an unrepentant Don Juan. The wise heads strongly recommended that she not waste her time, but rather break it off and forget him. The 'wicked stepmother' came to tell her off at her grandmother's, bellowing that she didn't know her and that she would never enter her hut, as her elder son would marry the fiancée whom she had already chosen for him.

Of course, her mother and grandmother each made a big effort to console and support her, but they sometimes had a lot of trouble ignoring the song of the sirens. Some days, when she found herself all alone by the riverside, or in the evenings watching the final flickers of the fire before falling asleep, she dreamed of fleeing far away, far from everything, by whatever means, including suicide. Some nights, she was prey to dreadful nightmares in which she had to block her ears so as not to hear the chorus of mocking laughter from some of the relatives in the tribe.

And then, one morning, sent by her husband, the grandmother of the lover-cousin came to inquire of the girl's own grandmother about her condition. In fact, the rumour was

doing the rounds from hut to hut that even though she was expecting a child she was still going to school. She confirmed to both grandmothers that she was indeed pregnant. The next day, late in the afternoon, the grandfather of the future dad undertook, with the latter's parents, what he judged to be the right course of action. They presented themselves at the old lady's place with two lots of customary gifts, one to excuse the wrong inflicted on her granddaughter by their son and grandson by wooing her in the dark, the other to ask for the young girl's hand. The girl herself, overwhelmed by all she had been through in such a short time, left for Noumea with her companion the next Sunday.

I got into the habit of going to her place every time I could on a Saturday afternoon. Over time, I became the little mum who brought Tulem,⁹² Twisties and Cheezels for the children. Although, during the first two years, I rarely ran into her young brother-in-law there — he was always out and about with his mates — later on he began to invite my girlfriend and me to go with them to the movies or the fairground at Bir-Hakeim Square. One eventful night on Bastille Day, after having had a go at the dodgem cars and the ferris wheel, taken a shot at darts and followed the floodlit procession, the two of us were left alone by our friends on a bench near the bandstand. The young brother-in-law was tipsy and couldn't stop jabbering. While I listened to him, I wondered for a moment why he was drinking so much, but I kept on taking in his words, getting drunk on them until the first light of dawn.

So began what I would sometimes call the seven years of misfortune of our adventure together, ridden as it was with set-backs, misunderstandings and break-ups, before becoming, much later, a placid family story. I had very quickly guessed that he took refuge in drink in order to escape from some anxiety or hurt, some haunting memory that he was careful not

to tell me about. He regarded me then as a kid, at once strait-laced, recalcitrant and fickle, whom he would tease by asking mischievously, before roaring with laughter, ‘Innocent young thing or little miss goody-goody?’

Torn between passionate arousal, illusions and disillusion and a stark reality that I didn’t really want to escape, I had a lot of trouble crossing over into the adult world. My good fortune was that she was there, waiting for me on Saturday afternoons under the mango tree. She would always say to me that she never felt completely alone, as she had her elder son and her young brother-in-law who reminded her, both by their first names and their resemblance to him, of the grandfather who had supported her against all odds when the sirens were at work in the tribe. We had stopped counting the number of whole weekends her companion deserted the house, when I caught sight of him one night in the entrance to a bar with a woman in a highly questionable pose. I was then flooded with even more affection for her and her children.

He found me under the mango tree one Saturday afternoon in the new yam season. Lying on an old mat, with my chin resting on a round cushion, I was off rambling in the forest searching for something with the Schtroumpfs from a Spirou comic book, when the sound of footsteps drew my attention to the hedge of hibiscus bushes lining the street. He quickly went round the row of flowers to end up blithely in front of me, his see-through plastic shoes barely skimming along the dusty surface of the yard. I got up to greet him, although I felt rather intimidated. With a bright smile lighting up his impish face and an amused glint at the back of his mischievous eyes, as his right hand lightly stroked my hair, he asked me softly in the language governing our kinship relations:

‘What are you doing, old girl,⁹³ are you alone? But don’t you recognise me? I am your grandfather. Where are the two

men of the house? I came to bring you this basket of yams. Back at home, we've already dug up and eaten the first batch.'

Was it these opening words treating me as an adult following our custom, or this palm of his hand full of softness like a balm of tenderness on my head, which froze that magic moment in my memory? Was it the fine finish of that small, beige-coloured bag of artistically woven pandanus leaves whose multicoloured woollen strap was slung like a sash over his shoulder, or the green freshness of the basket of yams wrapped in coconut leaves at his feet that took root inside me? Or was it quite simply this childish impishness in his look that still dazzles me even today?

The two men of the house had gone out as usual, but I wasn't alone. At the sight of the grandfather,⁹⁴ both children and their mother ran out of the house to greet him with open arms. He swept up his two great-grandchildren — his two young brothers according to our customary code of kinship⁹⁵ — and made as if to try out a few steps of the *pilou*⁹⁶ dance in honour of the new season's yam. Their mother had made a point of calling her first-born after him, the wise elder who had supported her in the village against all the odds. Although I had had the opportunity to see him a few years before, during that stay when I discovered the beautifully written name in the dictionary, it was especially through her admiration and affectionate gratitude towards him that I myself also began to look forward to his coming. Now he was there, and I knew that henceforth he would count for a lot in my life.

Indeed, he is the one who would teach us both that, as we had the same father, we were actually sisters. He is the one who would advise me to be patient and wait until his grandson got over his crush on her, my big sister, a crush that I discovered brutally one evening when, both drunk, he and his brother had

a violent fight on account of a blow the older one had landed on his wife.

It is he, the younger grandson, who became my husband, whom the elders have entrusted with the task of going to announce the grandfather's death to the maternal and other relatives.⁹⁷ He has taken⁹⁸ our elder boy⁹⁹ with him, and they have stopped down by the bridge at our Noumean grandmother's place, where she is waiting, pensive and sad, with her funeral wreath in hand. Perhaps she is remembering that distant and memorable escape with her female cousin, which took her away from the customary lands so long ago.

Keeping her word from the night before, my cousin¹⁰⁰ came to drag me a little nervously from a peaceful sleep. Maybe she was afraid that we wouldn't get away. We were then about 15, and were, I think, the youngest of those who accompanied their relatives in the chore of picking coffee beans, at that time of forced labour and the head tax,¹⁰¹ on a settler's huge plantation about a dozen kilometres downstream from our community.

After burning my tongue on the strong black, hot and bitter coffee prepared by our grandmother, I absent-mindedly stabbed my scalp getting ready, trying to straighten out my tangles with what remained of her old bamboo comb, which had been doing our frizzy hair as best it could ever since we were toddlers. In the meantime, grandma took a basket woven out of palm fronds containing our food supplies of yams, boiled green bananas with prawns and a few pieces of eel. By means of its two very supple handles, she strapped it on my back, and as she did so dictated to me in her rasping voice the rules for the day: avoid being exposed to the midday sun, diving into the river straight after a meal and bending over in front of a group

of people sitting down. She was going through the formalities of saying goodbye when our female cousin called me from the dew-drenched track by waving a piece of wood with an incandescent tip like a kind of torch. I left our grandmother's hut with a few carefully folded clothes in my hand.

The first crow of the cock broke the numbing freshness of the night as we joined the group waiting in Indian file down below on the bank. One of the eldest threw a pebble into the river asking the local water spirit for permission to ford the stream. He then stepped into the water, and the others followed suit, some shivering, some mumbling 'Brr! Isn't it cold!' and so on all down the line. The stream brought life back to my calf muscles, and the pebbles tickling my toes made sure that I was finally awake, while up there, behind us, from one tree to another, from one yard to another, the cocks were now crowing in relay to herald the new day. I stepped on to a slippery stone and nearly drenched the food but, by a lucky reflex, I instantly got my balance back and escaped with a wet hem. But my anxiety wasn't completely relieved until we reached the opposite bank, when I could hardly stop myself from dancing and jumping for joy. Yet, in the company of adults it wasn't done for us young ones to let ourselves be swept along by everything we felt, everything that stirred within us, especially at those times before dawn when the spirits returned to their own territory. Further along the path, I turned round to take a long, last nostalgic look at the morning star disappearing southwards into the distance above the mountain, just like the fading echo of the cock's crow on the reserve.¹⁰²

Now, down by the sea, the sky was slowly taking on a yellow hue, and soon all the birds nesting in the surrounding trees and thickets were going to mark the rhythm of our step with their noisy cacophony. The men, with old gunny-bags slung over their shoulders, gaily started out on the walk by

telling each other snippets of news, such as about an uncle who was recently caught in a drunken brawl by the police a long way from here without a pass,¹⁰³ or about a new type of yam in their patch.

The women followed with food baskets around their waists, giving glowing reports of the shimmering colours of the latest Uvea cloth¹⁰⁴ that had been admired on the counter of the coffee plantation owner's store, or promising each other a cutting of Polynesian hibiscus or bunches of dried pandanus branches for a beautiful mat, or dispensing various comments on the elopement of a young couple whose respective clans would not accept their union.

The conversations were punctuated at regular intervals by a few puffs of tobacco, whose curls of smoke escaping from pipes or cigarettes rolled up in dead banana leaves evaporated very quickly in the morning air, absorbed by the first rays of sunshine. Bringing up the rear were kids of my own age, boys and girls, telling stories about the recent marriage in a neighbouring tribe and the misfortunes of a cocky cousin, or else promising themselves to do a certain number of cans¹⁰⁵ of coffee for the day, or taking sides for or against the young couple on the run.

My cousin was among the ones who most approved of this couple, and she said so loud and clear to the great annoyance of those who, more cautious, talked softly enough not to be overheard by the adults and who advised her to do likewise. She burst out laughing in a mocking tone, then took up her cause with a vengeance by asserting that she would have acted just like the couple, without toning her raucous voice down one little bit. Occasionally, she darted an amused glance in my direction, while I stared at the pebbles on the path. She thought she was making things easier for me, but she was merely embarrassing me, making me as uncomfortable as

the others. She carried on her game of one against the rest while, turning around once more, I came to a final and secret conclusion about the smoke rising proudly and surely from behind us over by the reserve. I was trying my best to convince myself that it came from my grandmother's whom I imagined just then crouching before a freshly lit fire beside the ditch in our yam field, just as she had on the previous day at the same time when I was still with her.

The morning's work began as usual in the vast coffee plantation. After hanging our food baskets up in the clearing where we had our meals, everyone took what was needed for the picking — tins, buckets, cans, large sacks of thick jute — not forgetting pocket-knives and tobacco, as well as a few pieces of manioc baked in a hot stone oven and some rose-coloured or green rods of sugar cane for chewing on when we got hungry. Then the group broke up, each person finding his or her favourite spot again in front of the coffee bush that was closest to the last one picked the day before, and we began to hear the dry sound of the little red cherries dropping into the bottom of the container. I let myself be carried along with the flow, and filled my rusty tin before tipping its bright red contents into the can that my aunt, cousin and I had to fill. From time to time, between two bursts of laughter, my cousin sang sweetly, after her fashion, the words of a song of farewell to the homeland. The tune was being hummed by some, while others whistled it to accompany the mischievous singer, but I knew full well that it was to me alone that her coded message was addressed, even if I played along in silence and indifference.

Shaken by contradictory feelings of anxiety, relief and sadness, I picked the reddish little marbles almost mechanically, but a large number of them slipped out of my hands to drop at my feet under the fallen leaves. I hardly had

the strength to lean over and pick them up again. I even had trouble recognising their flamboyant charm and sweet taste, and my composure and carefree attitude had gone.

That morning, so miserable for me, ended as best it might with the big communal lunch in the clearing. I nibbled on some baked grated manioc, my mind preoccupied if not absent, something that my aunt noticed as she raised her eyebrows. My cousin, who was eating heartily, responded by saying that it was normal to be in this state when you had to wake up at all hours of the night to wade through a cold stream and come and work yourself into the ground like an animal with this forced labour. She came out with it in such an ironic undertone that everybody guffawed. She made the most of the occasion to tell her mother that she and I would go back home early that afternoon to fetch some wood with our grandmother. My aunt agreed, which was the blessing her daughter had been hoping for, as she had organised everything for our flight.

After our first can of the afternoon, we headed towards the reserve, only to work our way back a little further upstream and cut through the coffee plantation as far as the clearing near the river. We quietly followed it, protected by the shade of the tufts of sorghum, rushes and reeds. Only a heron, a kingfisher and some rails that we had disturbed as they were going about their business in the water witnessed the start of our adventure. All fear had left me. I felt as if I was sprouting wings and entrusted myself completely to my cousin to lead us safely to our destination. Our first stop was a night under the stars by the sea. The next day, we set off with my cousin's lover, who was in the vicinity, on a launch bound for Noumea, which we reached nearly a month later after numerous stops and other incidents.

Although his memory still haunted me, I was now far from my impossible dream. For the time being he was down there in that mission school with his brother by custom, our other cousin to whose home he had gone to be able to get an education. At the same time, that first departure had shattered my young girl's heart. I had patiently borne my pain, body and soul, and had been on the lookout for his return home the first day of all long holidays. He would always bring me an olive, a cowrie, a sea urchin's shell or a starfish, and would recount to me the fabulous stories and marvellous tales that he had read or heard about in class. He was the kid of my age group from whom I learnt the most. I ran away both to miss his wedding and not to have to refuse the one my parents had planned for me. This second reason was the same as the one that also made my cousin take flight.

In truth, I have never married and have never had children. Today, I am down by the river with this funeral wreath brought from Noumea for him. At the river crossing there is now a bridge, something for which he had fought for a long time. I am resting a little in the shade of the pine and coconut trees planted long ago by our grandfather to help me get over his leaving for school, down there among our people by the seaside, to whom our grandson¹⁰⁶ is now going to announce my cousin's death. He has departed to meet up with my sister down at the big waterhole just as on that afternoon when, from that same spot, the sight of their being together shattered my illusions.

We have to go into the valley, as our grandson from up there¹⁰⁷ has just told me that his grandfather, one of my customary brothers,¹⁰⁸ passed away last night. I now understand why I saw

myself with this brother in a dream I had this week. We had got back our looks of old and were children again climbing merrily up the mountain path where we used to grow yams and taros with our grandparents. There was dew about on the lush green foliage of the field, although the afternoon was coming to a close and the dusk was setting in. All that appeared very strange to me and I was just going to talk about it to him, my brother, when he ran ahead shouting.

‘Yes, here we are. And this is what we have been looking for so that I could go back down there to the desert island or up there to the holy mountain. Here it is, take it, for you are the one who will give it to them.’

There, at my feet, in the greyish yam patch, lay the sheaf of a cordyline bush. I was amazed by it and looked up to ask him if he was the person who had just tossed the symbol of the breath of life over to me, and where, how, why he had found it ... but my brother was no longer there, he had disappeared.

He came to remind me in the language of dreams of the task that lay ahead. The cordyline, the green field, the twilight, the island, the mountain, the disappearance — all dream-like signs that were clear enough for me to remember the code of dreams passed on by our grandmother. These nocturnal visions did, to be sure, rather perturb me the next morning. Alas, I quickly put them out of my mind to get ready for a council of elders meeting about a development plan to which I was invited. So, I forgot my brother and dismissed our grandmother’s teachings in order to go and deal with other things, which may no longer be relevant to our generation. And yet, the presence of us elders is needed everywhere as a support for the work of young people, as that of our elders was for what we have built. Every generation plants a tree whose fruits will be picked by the next one. But I must confess that

even such maxims do not give me any consolation or soften the pain riveting me inside and making my eyes moist. I am in mourning for him who dried my child's tears by his laughter and who, through his words, lit up my conscience as an adult.

It was on a far-off sunny late afternoon that he arrived at our house by the narrow path lined with dried straw and wild ferns, which wound its way round the niaoulis to our new huts. He was with our relatives from up there in the mountains,¹⁰⁹ but I only had eyes for him. He was wearing an old sweater full of holes over a faded *manou*.¹¹⁰ Barefoot, with thin legs on which a few scars were forming in places where he had grazed himself, he turned up blithely behind the adults with a small basket made out of woven palm fronds for his only belongings.

An imp with laughing eyes, he suddenly appeared there, right in front of me, giving me first the pleasure of his cheeky smile that would come to charm us all. Until then, I had been surrounded by sisters, but at last here was a brother and a playmate for me. I vaguely heard the words of welcome, and absent-mindedly said hello, barely noticing the customary exchange of gifts among the relatives. I was already completely taken by him, hearing him tell me about their trek on foot down from the upper valley, jumping up and down while he whistled the tune of an ancient lullaby all the way along the great river, as the new day was dawning. That was the day when his mischievous look, his air of impudence and his warm face became firmly embedded in my mind.

With him I would discover the layout of the common ancestral territory through its mounds, ridges, hills, peaks and streams, whose local names punctuated every one of his stories. I would also meet a host of characters, real, mythical or

imaginary — at that time I had a lot of difficulty telling which was which — who gave life to his tales. Such and such a grandfather would haunt our walks together, such and such a warrior was to umpire our games. Such and such a grandmother with a touch of the witch about her would disturb our twilight times. The blazing eyes of such and such a monster would burn our sleeping child's eyelids lit by the intermittent flames of the fire in the hut. A born storyteller, he would turn our nights into a living theatre where legend and the everyday world would joyously rub shoulders.

As kids among the elders of the clan, we would pile up logs next to the fire for the night. We would bring wood with an incandescent tip for them to light their cigarettes, and empty and clean their pipes. We would bring them something to drink and eat, and serve them coffee. We would accompany them to the fields, go fishing with them and attend various kinds of customary meetings, as well as more routine business. We also got water from the stream for the mothers, aunts and grandmothers. We would go with them to uncover crabs and other crayfish in the mangrove swamp and collect shells at low tide. In good weather, together we would dry out on the beach the rolled up bunches of pandanus leaves used for making mats or bags. We would help them with such a lot of other things, before and after school. It was school that brought my brother from the valley to live with us.

There was no school up there in the valley, whereas there was one on our reserve. It was at school where we learned to read, write the alphabet and count, nothing more. But, there again, I gained an understanding of the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic more easily with my brother than from our teacher. To tell the truth, it was he who drew me, dragged me, into the habit of school that had hardly had any attraction for me at first. I couldn't see what I should be going to school

for, while life at home with this brother was a delight and an adventure for me. On the other hand, and this is something I understood right from the first day at school, it was as if he was fascinated by the letters of the alphabet. Back home, while I was limping about on my tired legs, he would be doing some *pilou* steps as he sang ‘a-b-c-d’ to a catchy tune. ‘Do as I do. Sing “a-b-c-d”,’ he said with a wicked smile to my scowling look. ‘It’s easier to learn something and keep it in your mind if you sing as you go along’. This overcame any resistance I had, and that is how I learned the alphabet.

As the time for each long block of school holidays came near, I got sad and gloomy at the thought of the inevitable parting that would take my brother away to his enchanted forests of the upper valley. Once, I even came down sick from it. I stretched myself out on an old blanket, my head turned towards the mud brick wall so as to offer him my bitterness, when he brought me a plate of yams and fish and a bowl of citronella tea. He very quickly found the right words to take my eyes off the wall and make me smile. A second later, and as we let out peals of laughter, he advised me not to swallow the bones. I finished my meal quietly to the sound of a child’s voice haranguing an imaginary crowd with a fiery battle speech and to the rhythm of a violent clicking of dusty heels on the clay floor of our home.

I went with him up into the valley a couple of times, but did not stay for more than a week. He had managed to open up to the world very early on, while I was still clinging to my mother’s side, and for a long time to come I remained trapped within the family cocoon. Later, during the years we spent at a mission school, as he was patiently putting together a solid network of adolescent friendships covering virtually the entire country, I was forever doing the rounds of all our relatives and visiting the tribal village where I was born.

Down there, too, his cheeky smile, his look sparkling with mischief and his mind darting hither and thither had won over everyone, beginning with the missionaries themselves. One of them, who encouraged him to do a lot of reading, offered him his bound copy of the Bible and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which he had dedicated 'To you, little island Gavroche,¹¹¹ may you erect your own barricades one day!' Until last night, when he left us, he was to keep both those works religiously as precious relics that he wanted to leave to his faithful companion in old age, his grandson,¹¹² who inherited some of his features, his imagination and his freedom of spirit.

It was towards the end of that time at the mission, when school was over for us, that he went back to his valley. But whenever he could, he would come down and see us, sometimes just for the day. Each of his visits warmed our hearts just as before, and his presence was like a breath of fresh air. In those days he passed for the most talented dancer in his *pilou* group and the best singer of 'doo'¹¹³ at the Sunday evening gatherings in his parish. His fields and gardens were among the lushest and most fertile in his tribe. But what struck me above all else was his knack for devouring any written text that came his way — book, journal, newspaper, whatever — and his prodigious ability to memorise what the elders said about everything, as well as his constant need to be active and on the move. Did he feel hemmed in by our little corner of the country? Did he belong, as our grandmother was wont to say in days gone by, to the impalpable world of playful imps who sometimes dance in the moonlight, on the sand of an embankment or the grass in a clearing, a tireless round of will-o'-the-wisps?

He lived his daily life as a constant quest for something that none of us could give him. He confided in me once that he would have liked to discover the panorama from the top of the holy mountain of Cöumâ¹¹⁴ at daybreak, or have the experience of a certain Robinson Crusoe on a desert island. Quite sheepishly, I wondered what on earth he could be after, up there on that mountain, over there on that island. I didn't have a clue what he was on about, and he completely blew me away when, his eyes tinged with mischief, he added, 'Well, let's just say that I would like to go back there, since I have, as a matter of fact, already been there. In my dreams.'

The cordyline, the dream — although I had lived under the same roof and virtually been his twin brother, I didn't understand a word of it, it was all beyond me. The cordyline, the dream, his leaving us last night — by having remained down-to-earth all my life I was not there for the last breath of this impish trickster. Now there is nothing more for me to do but beseech him once again to fill me with his words, whisper the right ones to me so that, together and with dignity, we might offer the maternal relatives our sheath of cordyline.¹¹⁵

It is Already Tomorrow

After three calls from our old rooster Nâbwemî, ‘the one with a red cap’, so named because of a beautiful tuft of orangey feathers around his proud crest, I struck a match to check my watch. Surrounded by his sleeping companions down on the burao tree near the creek, Nâbwemî was clearly getting impatient, as it was already four o’clock. I quietly slipped down from our ‘Berliet’ bed, a big communal bed capable of taking up the whole width of a rectangular hut. The eight children were still asleep, but I was going to wake them up as soon as I lit the fire, for at five o’clock they should be fording the river to wait for the school bus by the road on the other side.

I struck another two matches before the fire caught in the dry coconut leaves under the dead branches. Just as I was pouring the water from the battered tin bucket into the soot-blackened pot, our eldest daughter suddenly appeared in the entrance to our kitchen-hut. She was 12 years old, and had been a sturdy helper up till now, even a kind of second mother to the littlies. The other three are their first cousins, the children of my brother who died two years ago. His wife had run off to Noumea shortly before with one of her uncles¹¹⁶ with whom she had been having an incestuous affair. The malicious gossips would have it that she had also had some one-night stands after the sales, fairs and other tribal festivities. Others

maintained that my brother had just given up and died of a broken heart after surprising her with her uncle. All I know is that his asthma attacks had nearly killed him more than once since childhood and that he smoked and drank a lot, which didn't help any. I will probably never know what did him in that fateful night, but ever since my sister-in-law ran off their children had become ours.

As I was pouring boiling water to thin out the black coffee in their bowl before scraping out the bottom of our sugar tin to give them all a share of what remained of yesterday's bread, our daughter washed the little ones' faces with the warm water from the basin. At this crisp time of year, I would always pour some of the warm water from the pot into it. As soon as they had gulped their breakfast down, we dressed them and combed their hair. Their clothes were creased as, having got back late last night due to the customary ceremony across the river, I didn't have time to fold up the washing that the children had got off the line when they came home from school. They all took their school bags and tore down the path towards the river crossing, where I made a point of going with them each morning during this cold period, so as to carry the youngest of my nieces across to the other side. She was coming up to her third birthday and had just begun pre-school, some 15 kilometres away in the village. I put out the lamp, deftly stuck two plastic bags in a long hessian sack, grabbed my machete and followed them out on to the path all damp with dew.

Since our eldest daughter's first year at school, I had got into the habit of going down to help her cross the river and, as the years went by, it was the same for whoever was the youngest at the time. This morning, before we crossed, it was my nephew who tossed a pebble upstream into the water. 'I'll close my eyes and when I open them again, we'll be on the other side!' he mumbled to the old resident eel. Everyone put

their thongs back on again on the other bank, which I climbed up towards our vegetable garden, after giving 300 francs to our eldest for sugar from the village and exchanging the usual words of goodbye.

As I walked along the narrow track lined down both sides with walls of sorghum from which I shook the dewdrops with the tip of my machete, I thought of the children and school. In our tribe, there had never been any school. We had been forced for a little more than 70 years now to travel to mission or government schools, and so far none of us had become a teacher or nurse or anything like that. Today, we still don't have anyone who has matriculated, although two students got their Intermediate Certificate¹¹⁷ last year. We had had joint discussions with members of the other tribes and communes in Kanaky¹¹⁸ at the time of the struggle committee and the EPK,¹¹⁹ of which I had been one of the prime-movers here, and where our eldest daughter had learned to read and write in our language, but the situation overall had hardly altered for our children.

The politicians had chucked at us willy-nilly the JSD,¹²⁰ 'under-developed youth', as those involved called themselves, provincial responsibility for primary education with five hours a week for the local language and culture, and the training program for the '400 professionals',¹²¹ but, at the end of it all, the bottom line gave us cause for concern. Every day I saw our children coming home with their hundred lines to copy out as a punishment for some misdemeanour or other, or with new words with which they then stuffed their speech in our own language, and I heard them hum the same old nursery rhymes like *A Green Mouse*, *In My Cabin Underground*, or *In My House*, *A Big Deer*,¹²² and so on. Sure, it's true, too, that they were singing the latest *kaneka*¹²³ hits at the same time, but yesterday we had also struck up the '*taperas*'¹²⁴ and here we are

about to enter the 21st century, after the suffering and sorrow of the 'events',¹²⁵ still drinking as much if not more, with AIDS and cannabis for our kids to boot.

I was thinking in particular of this latter curse as I was hurriedly filling both my bags with cut lettuces, for there, just opposite in the small forest above our huts and fields, the police had gone last month with our eminent people to pull out a cannabis patch, before taking away the young cousin grower who used to unload it on to dealers and other middlemen from Noumea and elsewhere.¹²⁶ Previously, some of my female relatives had often asked me in a joking way if certain new plants hadn't found some good ground above my place, but I had only half listened to them. Later on, I realised that I had never actually seen the young cousin going up in the direction of the forest from our yard or fields. But, several times after coming back, he offered us a roussette¹²⁷ or a couple of notou birds or some prawns, the fruit of his hunting or fishing from which he claimed to be returning. Now, like many others of his age, he was behind bars in the Camp Est prison.¹²⁸

I had waded back over the river and was trying to unearth a beautiful long yam, when my husband suddenly popped up. He had spent the night in the closest tribe downstream, at the home of some relatives with power and a television, watching a World Cup match very early in the morning.¹²⁹ I asked him to dig up the manioc and pull out the sweet potatoes, after which, clearly insensitive to the cool of the morning, he made eyes at me and put on his look that said he wanted to go for a tumble. I put it down to those sexy video clips they show in between the five and six o'clock news broadcasts on French TV in the morning. Then I said to myself that, after all, what with the tying of my tubes just after our fifth child, I no longer ran any risk of having another string

of kids. So, we went back down via the creek without wasting too much time.

With our long gunny-bag full to the brim on his back, my companion made his way across the ford straight to the place of custom,¹³⁰ while I went back to the house to rinse and dry the washing which had been soaking overnight, and to get changed. I folded the blankets that were strewn all over the 'Berliet' bed before tipping out left-over bits of banana and yam stuck together at the bottom of a cold sauce to give to Nâbwemîi and his family of hens and chicks. I went down to the pigsty to empty a satchel of crushed and grated coconut, pieces of manioc and taro that had been burnt in the oven yesterday in the customary way, and pour a pail of water into the muddy trough, under the starving snout of our big sow. Our scrawny, ginger cat was miaowing at my heels, but, having nothing for her, I advised her to go and chase after some mice.

Returning from the fields, I dived into the creek's waterhole, then slipped on my dress, drying my hair and giving a final brush with the comb and taking down my bag woven from pandanus fibres to drop into it a satchel containing my little kitchen knife and a folded *manou*. I also took another gunny-sack, which I wrapped around my machete. Before tearing down the slope, I took a cutting from our bush of roses with bright red petals that were budding in the middle of a wheel in the yard, to give to one of my cousins who had asked me for it yesterday.

After wading across the river, I went along a sorghum hedge before taking the path through the old coffee plantation to catch up, a little further on up the hillside, with the women who were meant to bring other niaouli barks or skins to cover the ovens. First I heard their peals of laughter, then vaguely picked up bits of their jokes, when one of them, having caught

sight of me, called out ‘Hey! Gèe! I met Ao¹³¹ down there, all bowed down under your sack bursting at the seams. Did you rip out all the cannabis plants in the forest up there to offer them to the police or what?’ And then the others burst out laughing even louder at her allusions to the recent drug case.

We talked away as we cut the niaouli bark from the trunk. We learned that the mortal remains of our young relative killed in the accident, whom we were going to bury at morning’s end, had arrived from Noumea about three o’clock in the night, accompanied by most of those clan members living in the capital. One of them told us that our young relative had been driving completely drunk without a licence and had literally wrapped a friend’s car around a lamp-post on the access road. She added that it was all the fault of his girlfriend with whom he had just had a violent argument. One grandmother, who flies off the handle easily, retorted that they’d be better off putting a stop to all their dirty, drunken behaviour, anyhow. Elderly women like her would much prefer to end their days in peace rather than keep on burdening them by mourning for their grandchildren who were passing away in such circumstances before they themselves did, whereas they should still have their whole life ahead of them.

Someone else observed that even my sister-in-law’s uncle was there, but without her, concluding that she must surely be wracked by shame and remorse.

‘You reckon! She works as a whore every night in clubs and doesn’t know us any more. She’s a real slut, but she won’t get off lightly when I get hold of her, for one of these days I’m going to smash her face in! She’s going to have to stop her antics!’ carried on the woman who had been interrupted by the grandmother.

‘Bloody hell! But what are you waiting for to teach her a good lesson? If I were in your shoes, I’d have already knocked

a few of her teeth out long ago, no two ways about it!’ declared the cranky elder to the tune of our laughter and shouts.

‘Yeah, that’s our granny, all right!’ we exclaimed as we loaded on to our backs the niaouli skins fastened with green straw before going down to the place of ceremonial custom.

The closest female relatives, grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters of the deceased, were sobbing in the hut where the coffin was lying under a mass of flowers, bouquets and wreaths. Between the bouts of wailing, an elder spoke to offer his sympathy and to thank the newly arrived. The latter went over to the lean-to, where the coffee and tea were being served, making room for the next lot. The young girls were serving at table, clearing away and washing the dishes. The young men were bringing wood, grating coconut or carving the meat. The mothers and grandmothers were peeling yams, taros, bananas, sweet potatoes and pumpkin for stewing and baking. In another hut further up, the old men and some old women were putting away the clothes, fabrics, bank notes, mats and *adi*¹³² shortly to be offered to the maternal uncles who were expected during the morning. From time to time, coming from the hut where the coffin was lying, we could hear a shrill, poignant, pained cry asking, over and over between sobs: ‘*Auu!* My son, why? Why? Why?’

As the women had decided on a second oven¹³³ for the beef and pork, we had laid down our bundles of niaouli barks in the adjoining yard, before arranging the stones, wood and dried ends of coconut palms to light it. When the fire took, we passed some banana leaves over it to soften them up for wrapping pieces of meat the boys brought. While waiting for the stones to get hot enough, others cut up two banana trunks whose damp fibres, once ground, were used for reducing the temperature of the stones, or else went to pick some young niaouli branches to flavour the meat. At the right moment,

we removed what was left of the white-hot wood with the help of some short sticks and widened the circle of burning stones where the meat was going to cook under the cover of niaouli skins.

We returned to the kitchen area to help the others roast chicken or beef, fry bananas or potatoes, peel and wash the lettuces and prepare the sauces and the vinaigrette. The girls kept on going back and forth serving the food and washing dishes. Further on, near the oven we used for cooking manioc and taros, the mothers and grandmothers were weaving plates out of green coconut leaves on which to share the food for the common meal after the burial. Occasionally, one of them forgot herself and broke out in laughter, before stopping just as abruptly at the others' mischievously disapproving expressions of *öö*. Children, whose parents had made them come for this day of mourning, were playing marbles at one end of the yard. I thought of our own and said to myself that maybe I, too, should have kept at least the three little ones home for the day, instead of sending them off to class where they would only drop off to sleep anyway, on account of that outrageous school bus timetable.¹³⁴

About nine o'clock, one of our elder uncles asked us all to gather in front of the hut, where the close female relatives were weeping and moaning near the coffin, to welcome the deceased's maternal clans who had just arrived. Their spokesman, offering in order the two rolls of cloth containing the *âdi*, delivered the corresponding speeches that are customary on such an occasion. One was the *urè-pârâ*, greeting the hosts who had come to the end of a common marriage path,¹³⁵ and the other was the *topai*, comforting them in their sorrow for the nephew whose life had slipped from them, its guardians. One of our grandfathers thanked them for such a strong, intense and warm speech. Then the weeping women

entered with their bouquets to cry out, groan and wail with the others around the coffin inside the hut.

Two benches placed side by side in front of the entrance acted as a catafalque to receive the coffin for the prayer of the minister, whose funeral oration before the assembled crowd ended with the question: 'Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh death, where is thy victory?' The congregation then sang in canon first in French the canticle 'To thou, the glory, o risen one ...', then one in Ajië¹³⁶ evoking a place somewhere in the sky and ending with 'Vèri, vèri, vèri! Gèré mâ rhau rhâmâ vi na-i!' 'Go forth! Go forth! Go forth! We will all run there!' The maternals then bore the coffin away to the cemetery, as the women bearing wreaths followed silently behind with the rest of the crowd.

Calling the deceased and the young people to witness, one of the important men of the clan reminded those present of the ills of a consumer society, the dangers of a certain form of modernity and the hazards of life on earth, before putting himself in God's hands. The sobbing became more heart-rending as another speaker recalled the different stages in the all too short life of the departed. Four maternal relatives went down into the grave to lay in the coffin. The crowd filed past, dropping in the flowers of the final goodbye, amid the constant wailing of the women. Then the maternal relatives shovelled in the first clods of earth, while two women took away the mother, who was on the verge of collapse.

It was also the women who, having been informed of the number of clans present, including those of the maternals who had come together in what was the single most important group, shared around all the food cooked on the fire or in the oven in the enamel, pyrex or coconut-leaf dishes. The young people came to get them and lay them out from one end of the yard to the other, with the largest parts being allocated

to the maternal relatives who had the place of honour. The share of the deceased's clan took up the very last place, in accordance with tradition. An elder listed the different portions assigned to each clan, before receiving thanks from one of the maternal relatives who was asked to take up his place at the table for his meal. Each of the other clans picked out a small space in the yard to eat its share. Having been advised of the date when they should come back to collect their dead relative's belongings, the maternals left us after a final cup of tea.

After the meal with the clan, new groups gradually formed in the shade of the trees, according to sex and age, to chat, play cards or just rest. Making use of this moment of respite, I gave the rosebush cutting to my cousin, who took me to her place close by to show me her new green plants and offer me a few young shoots of her own. She advised me to put them quickly in a pot and look after them well with an eye to some forthcoming sale for the tribe, the church, the Parents and Citizens Association or the Party.

'Do you know where they've come from? They've been to water their flowers. You only have to open their bag, I'm sure it's full of cuttings,' one aunt joked to the others when we got back for the cooking and basking late in the afternoon.

'Anyway, it wasn't the same kind of cutting that you and your son were watering up there in the forest,¹³⁷ when you offered me some roussettes, so I'd turn a blind eye,' I retorted, laughing, which made all the others squawk.

'Don't you worry about that, my son and I got you fair and square, for we both know what has to be done to shut the trap of blabbermouth women,' kept on the mother of the young cousin who had been arrested, as the others burst out laughing again.

While the elders were talking in the hut or around the table, and the oldest among them were having a chat aside from the rest, it was the women and the youngsters, as it had been in the morning, who were busy with the cooking, now preparing the oven for the evening meal. About five o'clock, the school bus dropped off the children who were meeting up with their parents there. That morning, I had told our eldest to go straight home to do her schoolwork and have a bath, as I would bring them something to eat in the early evening before the littlies went to sleep. When the children's meal was ready, I filled an enamel dish with yams, manioc, rice and a few pieces of chicken and meat with some sauce, and took it to them. Our eldest had heated up the pot for their bath and washed the littlies. By the time I got back, she had also served citronella tea and was doing divisions in her exercise book. I put the plates and forks next to their bowl and gave them dinner. When each of them had taken up their place again under the covers, perched high up on the 'Berliet' bed, I dimmed the light in the lamp that I put on the dirt floor. As I closed the door they gave me a sleepy 'See you tomorrow'.

I joined the women again just as they were uncovering the oven and gathering up the pots to fill the dishes for sharing out among the clans, just like at lunch-time, minus the one for the maternal relatives. After the same elder had indicated who was to get what, the clans took their food to various parts of the yard lit by a few light bulbs. Others headed off in the direction of the fires that were gradually being kindled in the half-light. Later, expressions of farewell began to signal the general dispersal, to the purring of engines and the banging of doors, as the first cars started up. My husband got into one of them so as not to miss the World Cup match the next morning. I stayed behind for a little while with my female

cousin before going home with two loaves of bread for the children and a basket of left-overs for the sow as well as for the proud Nâbwemî and his small family. As for the scrawny ginger cat, well, all I can say is that she would have to get by chasing mice again.

The children were snoring in chorus. Near the lamp, at my feet, a ginger bundle was purring away. I looked at my watch before putting out the light. A little after midnight! It is already tomorrow.

The Kanak Apple¹³⁸ Season

Kaatâdaa, the morning star, was still shining as brightly as ever, competing with the lingering moon which projected its cold clarity on to our damp steps slipping on the coral rock of the reef near the mangrove. We were out on an expedition with the adults, and us two *pwêêdi*,¹³⁹ the youngsters, revived by the coffee gulped down on my grandmother's lap, were merrily bringing up the rear behind our respective fathers and two older brothers.

The oldest of the group leading the way was my father's customary father, which made him my grandfather. The other small boy trailing behind with me and his brother were this man's sons, which made them my father's two young brothers. As such, they were the little fathers of me and my brother, who belonged to our brother clan with whom we did and shared everything.¹⁴⁰ Grandfather, who had a sack of woven pandanus over his shoulder containing a young conch shell, an *âdi* of great value, was chatting away gaily with my father just behind him. Our two elder brothers were talking about the raft that we would be using to cross a river mouth a bit further on. We two littlies bringing up the rear were enjoying ourselves seeing who could be the first to catch sight of Venus reflected on the little silvery waves of the reef's small salt-water ponds at low tide. That morning, Kaatâdaa lit up a great hope, that of being able

to get a future wife for my elder brother in the maternal clan that we were going to see.

We abandoned the star and its reflections to sink into the sludge under the mangrove trees in the swamp, as we went back up along the river's edge for a while in search of the raft that would take us to the other bank. We found it moored to the branch of a burao tree swimming in the water. The crossing was made in the still pale light of dawn, with everyone trying to keep his balance on the craft. As to each his due, it fell to the future fiancé, my older brother, to steer our raft with the help of a long bamboo rod serving as an oar. We listened to the slight sound of the surf on the bamboo as we fixed our gaze on the greyish islet all the way out there on the horizon, which was beginning to take on a reddish hue at daybreak. Patiently, inevitably, the sun continued to show its head above the sea through a mosaic in which mauve and violet gave way to pink, itself soon covered by a red that was quickly distilled into an orange-coloured sky.

Fascinated by this interplay of colour and light, we lingered a little on the sand of the beach we were now walking along, after leaving our skiff moored this time to the trunk of a young mangrove tree. Our fathers were still conversing up ahead, our brothers each in turn writing their names in the wet sand with a strip of reed, while we younger ones amused ourselves drawing straight, curved or broken lines in it. The smell of roasted coffee, the crowing of a cock and the sight of smoke between the tops of the auracaria pines led us off our path towards the hut of a grey-haired grandmother who lived there all alone and who served us coffee and baked manioc grated with coconut.

While we were enjoying ourselves opening and shutting our eyes as we blinked at the rising sun, the grandmother, truly heaven-sent, let the cat out of the bag by

telling our fathers that they would need a lot of verve and know-how if they were to win over the future fiancée's grandfather. He had apparently already told anyone who cared to listen that he did not want to see his granddaughter come over to us and that he intended her for another clan. The old lady ended by saying that while people might usually pay little heed to the likes of her or to the ravings of loners or weirdos living with the wood sprites, now at least our fathers knew what they were up against. So they would have to be careful in the way they went about making their request for marriage and mind their words if they wanted to seal the union. My father did not give anything away, but this new difficulty seemed to appeal greatly to my grandfather, who was absolutely set on overcoming it.

A short time after saying goodbye to the grandmother, we left the beach and branched off towards a narrow track that ran along the barbed-wire fence enclosing a settler's huge coconut plantation, where a few fattened cows were grazing peacefully in the company of a bull who gave me goose-bumps. The path led us towards the first huts of the tribe where we were to go. Upon our arrival in front of the hut of our granddaughter, niece and cousin, whom we would invite to become our daughter-in-law, wife and sister-in-law,¹⁴¹ everyone in her family came out on to the grassy avenue lined with coconut trees and araucaria pines surrounded by hibiscus and cordyline bushes. There, my father presented both the tobacco signalling the end of our journey and the *âdi* for the sharing of future grief, offerings to the living and the dead. Then, roused by his own compelling language in which all his talent as an orator came through, grandfather made his plea for the girl's hand in marriage and proposed the offer of union by giving the *âdi* containing the conch.¹⁴² With consummate art, he pronounced the words that have sealed alliances from time

immemorial. His speech went to the very core of our being as it galvanised us all in that yard lit by the first rays of sunlight and cheered by the chirping of morning sparrows. An uncle expressed thanks for the tobacco representing our journey and the *âdi* of mourning.

The maternal grandfather who would not have us for his granddaughter then suddenly appeared brandishing his axe. His voice fired with anger and magnified by rage, he let fly with a rough, sharp and cutting speech. Seeing red, he flayed us with words just as timeless, words of war, which cut us to the core, right there, in that same yard, while the same birds were singing and the same sun was shining. Fear crept over me, the image of the bull in the coconut field sprang back to mind, and I got goose-bumps all over again. Everyone around me bowed their heads, with the exception of my grandfather who, his eyes riveted on the jerky movements of the other grandfather, was getting ready to counter-attack. Then suddenly, as if in response to a silent call, my brother ventured a glance into the other camp, a glance returned by his future wife furtively wiping away a tear that was forming in her eye.

Still firmly holding the *âdi* with the conch wrapped in shimmering cloth, grandfather quietly cleared his throat before humbly approving of the vindictive speech his cousin had just graced us with. He acknowledged the truth of the criticisms that had been levelled against us, for without any doubt we were bloated with bumptiousness in presuming to tread upon the earth of a garden whose fruits had already been secretly promised to other, more prestigious, clans. We were nothing more than beggars with tawdry fields on niaouli hills wedged between mountain and sea. What good were the mule, the lobster and the cowrie if we were lacking in fine yams and if the water in our taro fields had run dry? All manner of seafood would lose its salt in ovens that had been extinguished for

want of condiments. We had neither hardwood to build our huts nor thick straw to cover them with. We had no rest mat, our banyan tree no longer provided any shade through lack of leaves and the grass of our front entrance path was wilting.¹⁴³ Beneath our roof with gaping holes, our sacred basket was now devoid of any treasure.¹⁴⁴

All that was true, and still we had come, now standing here empty-handed before the maternals and uttering strange things as if we were creatures possessed by the spirits of the forest. We had not lost our way, though. We had taken the path laid down by our common ancestors, a path that we wanted to make stronger and longer. We wanted to give new life to the union to which we are grateful for being here alive all together. For how could the mutual bonds between us through our maternal side have existed if each camp had not been nurtured on the fruits of the other's garden? We had not lost our way, but came in all humility to ask for the hand of a girl who would not be our granddaughter, niece and cousin, if in her veins there did not flow our blood. We had not lost our way, but the word and honour rested with the maternals in their yard, under their coconut trees and araucaria pines, and it would be as they decided, as our traditions decreed.

The sobbing of the grandmothers, the sniffing with emotion, the clearing of throats and the slight coughing on account of the occasion were now muffling the teary voice of the old maternal relative who clasped grandfather to his chest, thanking him for his words of wisdom which would console him for the state of confusion and distraction into which the thought of the impending departure of his favourite granddaughter had plunged him. The grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters and cousins surrounded the two *pwêêdi* while the grandfathers, fathers, uncles and cousins took our elder brothers over to a mat where there soon appeared a steaming

pot of coffee together with a sugar jar, china bowls, plates of boiled green bananas and dishes of baked manioc. The women took us younger ones away with their children to feast on ripe bananas, delicious pawpaws and slightly acidic mangoes for hours on end. They vied with each other in getting us drunk on fresh green coconuts, juicy sugar cane and other passionate fruits.

The midday meal brought us all together again around hearty servings of chicken *bougnas*,¹⁴⁵ interspersed with large dishes on which the red shells of crabs and lobsters competed with the white smoothness of trochus shells or the grey coarseness of dawas. An old female cousin declared, as she gave me a knowing look, that the stomachs of kids who were hearty eaters looked like those of balloon fish and their sting like the arrogant nose of a dawa. Everyone burst out laughing and I rubbed my tummy with satisfaction. At day's end, when it was time to leave, my future sister-in-law held out to me a small basket woven out of coconut palm leaves containing very pink, very ripe Kanak apples. 'Here, take this for the trip back, and sow a seed from it down there for me, in remembrance of this day.' That was the pact marking our mutual adoption, which was never to be broken thereafter.

Actually, I am the youngest of three brothers. While the clan's elders had opted for the path of traditional marriage for the first-born, they left it up to the next in line to choose his own wife. He met her while staying in the mining centre where they would subsequently spend the greater part of their lives. We were to learn much later by word of mouth that he had at first been head over heels in love with another girl, who turned out to be the cousin of the one he ended up marrying. Their story was known to the parents of this first fiancée, since they used to receive him at their place, which signified their tacit agreement to a possible official union.

We never found out, nor will we ever, how my second sister-in-law came into the picture. There were those who talked of violent scenes of jealousy in which she was supposed to have wielded a dagger and machete to intimidate all other rivals who dared come near my brother. As she lived rather far away from us, my father and grandfather were to go by boat, on foot and on horseback to ask for her hand in marriage. It was obviously out of the question that the *puêêdi* would take part in what was a veritable expedition. But we went with them as far as the tribe's small jetty where, pensive and sad, we stayed a long time, waving our hands after the little ferry that was sailing off into the twilight.

On their return, grandfather would tell about a girl who was very sick during their stay up there. He had had the impression that, on hearing this news, my brother had been shattered. In answer to my grandmother's question inquiring what my second future sister-in-law was like, her husband told her something like, 'We'll have our work cut out with this one!' He even added that the gleeful manner in which their offer of union had been accepted looked to him like the way you welcomed someone who was finally going to relieve you of a real millstone around your neck. He agreed with my father and the other leaders of the two clans on the same date for the wedding of my two big brothers, and they made it known to all our allies by taking to each of them the piece of cloth for tying the knots in the network of kinship relations.

Our relatives would come one by one to offer their *âdi* of bank notes, fabrics, clothes, mats, yams, taros, manioc, chickens and pigs so that my two sisters-in-law and their families could have a memorable celebration, and to honour them as best they could. Having to allow for the days when the ferry called in, the clans from the mining region, accompanying the fiancée from the red land,¹⁴⁶ as I would call

her, arrived a few days prior to the start of the ceremonies. This fiancée, as proud as the nickel peaks of her red land, and perhaps as flayed as them — who knows? — proffered neither a smile which could have tamed me nor a gesture which could have charmed us. And how could she have, as never for a moment did she leave my brother's side or take her eyes off him, and she spoke to him only in her own tongue.¹⁴⁷ The long and the short of it was that, for the fiancée from the red land, we simply did not exist.

So, more than ever, I waited for our other cousin and sister-in-law, especially to show her our young apple tree which was springing up. On the morning of the festivities, while she was sitting head bowed on a beautiful long-fringed mat with the sister-in-law from the mining country waiting in front of all our assembled relatives for the speech that was going to entrust them to us, my gaze fixed on her blonde head of hair glistening in the sunlight. I was secretly hoping for a little sign of complicity that would confirm in front of everybody that she had not forgotten our pact. And, in fact, just as one of the speakers was talking about the black *âdi*, the colour of the alluvial earth of riverbeds and the almond colour of burnt bancoule nut,¹⁴⁸ about the *âdi* woman as source of life and mourner of the dead, her sparkling eyes flashed a smile in my direction.¹⁴⁹ While all around everyone was holding back with contained emotion, I was practically beside myself with laughter. However, unable either to roar with happiness or jump for joy, I just kept on fidgeting, with a big grin on my cheeks. I pinched the arm of my little brother and bosom buddy, the other *pwêêdi* who, half-surprised and half-amused by what he thought was a new game, asked me in a whisper, 'What's up? What is it?' 'Nothing, nothing,' I repeated, my eyes

riveted on golden locks that were gradually disappearing under the weight of all the fabrics of welcome ...

It is the Kanak apple season. Some of the apples were rotting in the tall grass that had been trampled underfoot in the shade of the old apple tree that was now nearing its 40th year. It was like those memories of scenes featuring my sister-in-law that came flooding back to me there. The grass, like other apples, had been squashed by men who had come with the three soothsayers.¹⁵⁰ The latter had maintained that our cousin and sister-in-law had been practising her craft there for a long time, just as she had been up under the banyan tree of the ancestors, down by the mangrove swamp and, at night, at low tide, out near the reef. The Kanak apple season was becoming the season for charlatans, or the time for sorcerers.

The soothsayers and others accompanying them had been staying in our community for two days for a witchcraft trial against our sister-in-law and two other relatives. As they kept on denying everything, it dragged out and the pressure mounted. Rumours grew louder, threats increased and insults rained down at different times. Yesterday morning, when the men got back from their investigations under the banyan tree, a lot of people ran away shouting at the sight of them, scared by the creeper wrapped around their foreheads. This cleared the way for them to visit the places they wanted to. The psychosis was setting in and my sister-in-law was wilting.

'If you're really a witch, you'd better show us quick smart where you have your stone and leaves hidden, 'cos, let me tell you, I'm sick of bringing food here every day to feed everybody!' the wife of one of the accused called out to her in

the afternoon. Later, one of the seers took her husband aside, without witnesses, saying that maybe that way he would feel freer to tell what was being asked of him, but after a long while they came back empty-handed, and noticeably drunk.

‘Hurry up and start talking, for at 10 o’clock I’ve got to go home and sleep, because tomorrow’s Monday, and I’m working on the State plan, and have to be at the village by six o’clock!’ the same seer, upset with our sister-in-law, yelled at her in the evening. Then he went out and called one of the other two over into the half-light, saying loud and clear that he had something important to ask him. The other went over to the pick-up truck in which they had come to get a little string shoulder bag. As he was handing it to him, he pulled out a bottle that he gulped eagerly down. Back in the courtroom-hut, he was again threatening our sister-in-law with things like, ‘If you keep on denying it all, I’ll make you shit your pants right here in front of everyone!’

I came to her defence, for I don’t believe a word of what they are accusing her of, and I’m also finding that there are more and more shenanigans in this trial. The sister-in-law from the red land was not impressed at all and went at her and at us even more ferociously than before: ‘That’s why you’re sterile and have never had a child, because you were feeding your dead skulls! And you, it’s no surprise that you support her, as everybody knows you’ve been sleeping with her ever since your brother’s death!’

We both know full well that there is no truth in any of this. But I’m afraid for her, as it seems to me that she’s now stopped eating. And this afternoon under our apple tree is really the first time that those happy hours of yesteryear have come flooding back to me so clearly, with something like the quickness and imminence of a god.

Yes, I really am quite afraid that she won’t get over this trial.

‘Dos montes ...’

I was on my way back from Betty’s in Redfern, where I had gone to check the schedule for Katie’s meetings. She was coming to spend two days in Sydney on her way back from London before going on via Hawaii and San Francisco to New York, where she was to meet up with Eric and the others for the final details about their delegation’s stay in Cuba. I made my way towards Martin Place,¹⁵¹ where Ken was to give me some copies of the program for the Sydney meetings. I would show it to her as soon as she arrived at Mascot,¹⁵² where it was my job to collect her later in the morning.

She did arrive, fresh and smiling as usual. I had often said to myself that she was one of those over whom time held no sway and that it could go on indefinitely like this. Once again I wondered how she could emerge as she did, calm and relaxed, from those long and endless trips, all that jetlag and those marathon meetings. Was it possible to be both so ‘speedy’ and so composed at the same time? But maybe she actually found her energy and peace in the constant spin of such permanent exile! After we greeted each other, she wanted to know what we had concocted for her for these two days in Sydney.

‘My final afternoon is free, so we could go for a walk and have a bit of a talk, just the two of us, what about it?’ she announced after glancing through the sheet I handed her.

I agreed, before taking her travelling bag and following her towards the Bureau de Change. There she asked for some PNG notes in addition to Australian dollars, but I barely gave this a thought at the time.

At the Pitt Street premises, we met up with the representatives of Kanaky and East Timor, who were to be speaking alongside her at the meeting set down for the evening. We then went down to Dixon Street to have lunch together in a little restaurant in Chinatown. There was Katie from Jayapura, Alberto from Dili, Robert from Noumea, Ali from Islamabad, Ken from Melbourne and myself from Santiago. In other words, none of us was from Sydney, none of us was from this vast Aboriginal land where the tracks of struggle and the paths of exile had led us. Before returning to Noumea, Robert was finishing a tour of the major Australian cities and had come up from Melbourne with Ken, whose responsibility it was, along with Ali and myself, to organise contacts for Katie, Alberto and him in Sydney. Alberto had just finished a series of briefings in the main New Zealand universities on the situation in East Timor, and was to make his way to Havana via New York in the same delegation as Katie.

Katie was sorry for having gone through London without a representative of the Kanak movement, which in recent weeks had been getting a lot of media attention through its boycott of the elections held on 18 November.¹⁵³ She had, however, been able to pass on the most recent news provided by Eric and the Paris group. For Alberto and her, what was happening in Kanaky was a step of some significance in the history of national liberation movements and the emancipation of the indigenous peoples of the region. Together with Ali and Ken, we recalled, not without some good humour, the tireless efforts over the past decade of our

meagre network, whose Australian nucleus was scattered throughout the country, to stir up public opinion and get people to lobby for their cause. The revolt that set Kanaky alight¹⁵⁴ could only encourage us to double our efforts, especially as the media still kept silent about the armed struggle of the West Papuan Melanesians against the colonisation of their country by the Indonesian regime of Suharto in the past 20-odd years, and the invasion of East Timor by the same government's troops in December 1975, after the Portugal 'of carnations' had abandoned the island.¹⁵⁵

Betty came in the early afternoon to find out about the airline tickets and took Robert away to confirm their imminent departure. Katie told them not to worry about hers, that she would deal with it later, before reassuring, in her manner at once calm and firm, Betty and Robert who were pressing the point. I told myself that she no doubt had a good reason, and so did not really say much. Ken went with her to the meetings arranged with various NGOs — Aboriginal, political, trade union and religious organisations — as well as with a few reporters. Ali and I tagged along with the rest of our little group to put the final touches on preparations for the evening's meeting.

At nightfall, Katie wanted to have a quick wash at the house before joining up with the others at the meeting. While she was in the shower, I could not help thinking yet again of my young sister Carmencita and the strange likeness of character, behaviour and attitude between her and Katie. In the past, Carmencita had told me that if she had to leave in a hurry, she would take a book and a few drops of fresh water in a flask with her. After our first meeting, I very quickly noted in Katie this same need for water and reading, the same desire for purity and spiritual uplifting. But while Carmencita had clearly got that from the baroque omnipresence of the Catholic

faith over the whole of the Latin American continent, Katie had doubtless inherited it from her huge Pacific island studded with proud mountains, whose magnificent waterfalls would always wash over her with their luminous transparency, wherever she might be.

On our arrival in the hall a good hour before the start of the meeting, voices from a recent cassette brought by Robert from Kanaky were chanting '*N'est-ce pas Eloi, n'est-ce pas Eloi ...*' ('Isn't that right, Eloi, isn't that right, Eloi ...'), calling their assassinated leader¹⁵⁶ to witness concerning the problems of the struggle. At her request, I translated all the words of this song for Katie, as she, Robert and Alberto were being greeted by old acquaintances and introduced to newcomers in the little hall that was slowly filling up. Then an Aboriginal activist introduced the three speakers and their movements, and everybody rose to give a big round of applause.

The meeting began with Alberto reminding his audience of the history of the struggle of the Maubere people¹⁵⁷ and Fretilin.¹⁵⁸ He went on to describe in detail the latest actions of the Indonesian occupying forces — arrests, tortures, massacres — in the capital Dili and other parts of the island, before giving an account of the international community's silence on the situation in his country. Katie followed suit with the same story about the situation in West Papua and spoke of the pressures being exerted by the Indonesian regime on the PNG authorities, which had resulted, among other things, in the arrest of some of the movement's military leaders near the border, where they had been invited by eminent members of the Papuan government. She also mentioned the development of the armed struggle, exposing the various forms of the politics of colonisation by settlement being practised by Jakarta in West Papua. Robert talked about the organisation of Kanak resistance, the formation of a provisional government,¹⁵⁹

the setting up of the EPK,¹⁶⁰ the Pisani Plan,¹⁶¹ and the whole extraordinary state of affairs in Kanaky where a curfew was in place and French occupation troops were receiving reinforcements, before ending with the inquest into the assassination of Eloi Machoro.

Sitting in the first row, I thought I could definitely see Katie's eyes glowing as if on the verge of tears, just like Carmencita at some of our meetings back then in the poor suburbs of Santiago. Poor Carmencita! Poor Katie! Would we never shed enough tears for this world where the very least one can say is that men and women of our kind were stereotyped as negatives of a black and white film! How much would we still have to swallow in order to cut a proper figure in the interest of the cause, to be strong because we have to, while the hurt, the wrenching pain is there ready to tear us apart as if in childbirth? My *in petto* ruminations got lost in the *brouhaha* of the audience's questions to which Katie was now beginning to reply without batting an eyelid.

The evening carried on with a meal among comrades at Ali's place in Petersham. Robert and Katie had a long discussion in one corner of the lounge room to the sound of cassette recordings of songs from East Timor, West Papua and Kanaky. However, judging by the serious look on their faces, I didn't dare go over to them, as if I was a little afraid of dropping in on some family secret. The distant image of Pablo debating with Carmencita, back there, so long ago, flashed furtively across my mind before giving way to a more immediate one of Katie with Eric, whom we had all been linking together these past few years. Yet, Alberto had told me that it was he and not Katie who was to meet up with Eric in New York for a meeting of the UN Decolonisation Committee before going on to Havana. At the end of the night, when she said goodbye to her friends and comrades even more warmly

than usual, I had the strange impression that she was living this precise moment with particular intensity, like it was something precious. Then the memory of my last evening with Carmencita back home sent a shiver down my spine.

I quickly forgot my uneasiness on the way back as Katie spoke and joked a lot with Ken, Robert and me. We seemed to be crossing over a sort of no man's land or moving in a kind of cocoon from which our problems were temporarily shut out so as to give ourselves the right to have a good laugh together in the night of the city. But it was Katie who showed the most joy, which the rest of us found infectious. She took us on a little cloud far from the inertia of daily existence, and we spontaneously let ourselves go just for the pleasure of being able to snatch a few precious moments of celebration with her. Back at the house, we talked and laughed a long while over a last glass before each of us went to have a rest in view of the next day's meetings.

In the morning we found a note from Katie saying that she was going to confirm her flight and asking Ken to meet up with her directly at the first appointment. As I was arguing that she could just as well have called the agency from the house, Ken suggested that maybe she wanted to walk a bit, while Robert kept quiet, or more exactly did not want to talk about it. I thought at the time that he didn't make a big deal of it as it was probably just a minor detail not worth haggling over. But then where did I get this sudden twinge from, which turned into a feeling of inexplicable distress as the morning went by before becoming profoundly disturbing? It was in this state of indefinable anxiety that I met up with Katie again in the early afternoon.

She noticed my worried look and wanted to know if her proposal the previous day for us to have a bit of a talk together was still all right with me. I readily agreed, as if what

we were going to confide in each other would deliver me of that terrible anxiety beginning to weigh me down. Before going out to do some shopping in town, Katie offered me a scarf from Paris, a handbag from London and collections of poetry by two Melanesian women, Grace Mera from Vanuatu and Julie Sipolo from the Solomons, as well as a book by the Fijian, Vanessa Griffen,¹⁶² dealing with the problems we as women have. I was very touched and a little overwhelmed, just as on every occasion that she bequeathed me something of her certainties, doubts or hopes, each time she left me a little of herself before departing. My anxiety was already easing while we were out shopping, as I knew that the time when Katie's words would set me free of it was drawing near.

We went along the wharves, but unlike on other occasions, we were hardly tempted by a ferry ride around Sydney Harbour or across to Manly, or a visit to Taronga Park Zoo. We took a few photos on the long steps of the Opera House before heading off slowly towards the large park in the Royal Botanical Gardens. I did not know if it was because of the peacefulness of the place or for some altogether different reason that Katie chose to talk to me there, but it was really an ideal spot for a quiet conversation. As was her wont, following a ritual established over the course of our meetings, she began by asking about the latest news from Santiago, for she was one of the few people in whom I could confide my feelings. It was not the same for Katie, however, as until now she had been content to tell me only about her political ideas. As for the other facets of her life, I knew very little, really. While I gave free rein to my Latino temperament with her, I respected her discreteness, that Melanesian silence that was sometimes as unfathomable as an Easter Island *moai*¹⁶³ or as intense as the gaze of an Araucanian Indian.¹⁶⁴

Once, without intending any malice whatsoever, I wanted to egg her on a bit by asking what state of mortal sin she believed herself to be in or what act of penitence she was mixed up in to have blocked out her life as a woman for so many years. She replied gently, but her words came like a slap in the face.

‘You really are a descendant of those conquistadors who, not content at having cut out our tongues in the shadow of the cross, would still want us to talk to them! You’ve lost your loved ones and taken up exile here in this land of the Aborigines, okay, but did you ever know even just one word of the language of the old Araucanian woman you passed by every morning in Santiago? Do you realise, at least, that she has been living in exile in her own country for centuries?’

All at sea, I stammered out some vague excuse, like a little girl caught out. But, as if she had just calmly reprimanded an impertinent kid, Katie was already thinking about something else. Having barely finished slapping me in the face with those words that I will remember all my life, she extricated herself from the situation with an evasive movement meaning, ‘All right, let’s get back to the point!’, while the lines of Pablo Neruda took hold of me like some remorse:

*To recover from your wound you only need to weep,
To recover from your wound you only need to sing,
But at your own doorstep flows the blood of men,
Blood of the widow, the Indian, the poor man, the
fisherman [...]*

My innermost thoughts poured out for quite a while in the balmy air of the park as the Farm Cove gulls flew carefree overhead. I felt myself becoming like one of them, bearing my soul in the exquisite heat of that afternoon with Katie. If our time together had not been so short, I would gladly have let myself go as if sliding down to the bottom of a soft downy nest.

Then I remembered that it was she, Katie, who had proposed these precious moments that I must not steal from her. At the same time, I was apprehensive about her starting to speak, as I knew that in doing so she would turn the page on our exile. 'Our' was perhaps going too far, for she had often told me that she did not feel exiled in the land of the Aborigines, that there had once been a time when Australia and her country formed a single continent and that you always had to accept having your certainties shaken in order to see borders differently to the way they are drawn on an army map or with a compass and set-square.

The fatal moment sounded when Katie calmly confessed to me that she would indeed be leaving that evening, but not in the direction scheduled. She did not have a ticket for New York via Hawaii and Frisco any more than for Havana. Instead, she would be heading off to Alice Springs and Uluru, to greet the desert where she loved to read the land with her Aboriginal brothers and sisters. Then she would go up to see others in Darwin before taking off via Torres for Port Moresby from where she would cross the border, the demarcation line cutting their great island in two. And then, at last, at the end of the road, her proud mountains and majestic waterfalls of West Papua would be waiting for her.

She had made her intention known to the main overseas officials at a meeting in Amsterdam, just prior to going to London. Of course, at first, most of them had been opposed to it, arguing, among other things, that their movement remained unknown internationally and that they had to remain constantly active in promoting their cause and raising awareness of how the situation was evolving on the ground. They decided that, although their numbers had increased, they were still very inadequate considering the enormous task ahead of them. This task was all the more

arduous in that Indonesia still enjoyed prestige in the camp of Third World countries, given its contribution to the non-aligned movement, whose first conference had been organised by Ahmed Sukarno in Bandung in the Fifties. What's more, they were wondering how she intended to return, whether she had seriously weighed up the opportuneness and the risks of such an undertaking, and whether she had really made sure that her established contacts had not in the meantime been infiltrated by the CIA or quite simply dismantled by the Indonesian police and army.

For her part, Katie was not at all sure after a decade in exile that she still knew anything of her country's real situation. It was no longer enough for her to get reports on the brutality of the Indonesian army as it settled in the new arrivals in the pay of Jakarta, or on the arrests of leaders who had been betrayed or set up, or on how the armed struggle was progressing. Carrying out effective work and gaining outside support depended also on the ability of the small groups of activists on the inside to educate and organise their own people politically, in the countryside and the towns, in order to reclaim an inch of ground each day from the enemy, and little by little weave the threads of a vast movement in support of armed resistance. The two tasks went hand in hand for her, and she now wanted to return to the grassroots, as she judged herself to be increasingly bereft of information and local understanding that were vital if she was to be able to carry on the other activity properly.

So there! She had given me her political reasons as I expected she would, and I did not regard her commitment to go back to the grassroots as an emotional reaction, but rather as a simple requirement of a strictly military kind, befitting the fighter that she was. These arguments were already a reply to the questions beginning to besiege me, the same ones, really,

that the comrades in Amsterdam had asked. Then I realised that we had discussed them together many times over already in the past, as they also concerned me. In fact, the uneasiness that I was wanting somehow to exorcise through this exchange was one of finding myself at the crossroads and of having to make a choice. Katie's return to her homeland was also my return to my own, but she did not seem to see it like that and even less as a final farewell. Her clear and precise explanations meant that, all in all, there was no reason to get worked up. Life would go on, the world would keep on turning come what may, and we would get over it.

I emerged at her side from the park with the same restrained emotion, the same quiet hope I had felt during a recent farewell ceremony in Kanaky, where I really came to know that a goodbye could be a beginning, that the end of something could be a birth, that nothing was ever final. I again saw the moment when, 10 years before, a Fijian sister from their Pacific Island delegation introduced her to me, with the white veil and blue stripes of Mother Theresa in the background, on that Aztec site between two meetings of the forum of Non-Government Organisations at the international women's conference in Mexico City. After the military coup and the setting up of the dictatorship in Santiago, I was then embarking upon my second year of exile in the Mexican capital. We subsequently met on several occasions at other conferences, until my decision to come to Sydney. The cause, the loss of our loved ones and her strange resemblance to Carmencita, my younger sister who had disappeared never to be found again, had woven indissoluble bonds between us.

I now knew that I, too, would soon go back home to Chile. I was quietly asking her to send me some news to the usual post office box about how she was getting on, when it struck me that I had just uttered the exact same words as

I had to my young sister the last time we saw each other. What was even more curious was that Katie made a movement of her head as she smiled, just like Carmencita had done back then in Santiago. I looked up as two seagulls went flying by into the distance. Katie! Carmencita! *‘Dos montes de soledad orgullosa’*, Garcia Lorca’s line sang in me.

The Hut

Grandfather's hut remains without any doubt one of the clearest memories I have of my childhood, looming still as luminous as a sun-filled Kanaky morning by the sea. The impression it has left in me is of something huge and sparkling. To the young girl that I was back then it seemed so big, in fact, that I remember it now whenever I try to count the stars in the moonlight or fix the horizon that divides the azure sky from the deep-blue Pacific. And I see myself in turn as a tiny ant staring out at the world and the whole wide universe beyond.

An enormous round matron it was, perched there high on a hillock surrounded by large hewed rocks, at the end of the path lined with tall coconut trees. Behind it, there had previously stretched out a broader avenue of auracaria pines, another living trace of the ancestors who once lived here.¹⁶⁵

On each side of the entrance, small pink and white flowers that looked like lilies were sprouting in the soil on the large rocks. A sheath of coleus¹⁶⁶ sat regally atop, the last stem of which is offered to the maternal uncles on the occasion of a birth. On the right side, at the end of the clump of shrubs, the cordyline bush with its thread-like trunk was waving its long green leaves, the youngest of which are brought to the maternal relatives¹⁶⁷ in mourning. There, for hours on end, sitting on the low stone wall, I used to love to take in the scent of this flowering cordyline, mixed with that of the leaf torn

from the tuft of citronella also growing there. I would triturate it this way and that under my nostrils, all the while observing the constant buzzing of bees gathering honey from the perfume-laden cluster.

Behind the hut, in the shade of an enormous banyan tree, a rock edge all covered in dark, damp moss jutted out. In fact, what was once a sculpture, of the sort that can still be found in our cemeteries, raised its skeletal remains while on top was an immaculately white, but perforated conch, whose wounds were the result of the ravages of foul weather. A row of shrubs with yellow leaves and a thin trunk, knotty and drawn, protected this small taboo place. A distant ancestor had been sleeping there for several generations, and none of us would have dared to set foot in it, or even take a peek. We were much too afraid to disturb his sacred slumber.

The adobe walls, a mix of black mud and straw, stood quite low, with the split bamboo canes enclosing the hardened earth poking through in various places. The ground crackled and seemed to proudly shelter all its clefts like so many tattooed motifs thrust upon it by refractory nature.

The roof of dried straw was surmounted by a solid peak¹⁶⁸ supporting two worn old conches. One of my joys on rainy days was to come and admire the droplets of water sliding endlessly down the tips of straw.

To the left of the entrance, a rather old, squat sculpture displayed its facial features gashed in the wood. It was the clearly visible guardian of the place, and it sometimes inspired feelings of dread in me, without my being able to pinpoint any particular reason for this.

Facing the door, a sole window with a wire hook gave on to the ancestor's rock at the back. Whenever I was to sleep there, I would hurry to shut it as soon as dusk descended. It was said that a *tibo*¹⁶⁹ mother sometimes lived on the banyan tree

and that her sagging breasts were absorbed into its distended roots.

Around the central fireplace where a few sizeable pieces of very dry, dead wood still lay smouldering, some cut bamboo trunks were placed along the woven pandanus mats. These were spread out on palm fronds and banana leaves mixed with straw and a fern from the hills that is much sought after for the purpose. Two shorter bamboo shoots carved out a small passage-way strewn with pieces of white coral from the doorway to the fireplace.

Lying against the wall on the right, half-way between the openings, was a large trunk that was always closed. Grandfather used to put his lantern, tobacco and pen-knife on top of this trunk, which was said to contain his *adî*.

Directly opposite hung a bundle of woven palm fronds with rolled-up mats inside which were kept for customary ceremonies. Whenever such ceremonies took place, they did so right here in front of this hut, on the *nûrûga*¹⁷⁰ lawn between the coconut trees lining the main entry path. The last one to be held in this place was to be that marking the end of the period of mourning for grandfather himself, during which there was a *pilou* in the night.

Gradually, as the months passed, the hut was to become deserted and finally collapsed on to the dry grass growing all around.

A Lady in the Night

Not a petal left of the flimsy tufts of water-soaked garden balsams running along the walls of the hut. Some of those uprooted are still clinging to the edges of the tiny trench dug out by the droplets trickling down from the straw roof. The bright-red sage shrubs, a few of whose bunches are withering lower down in the small sloping yard, have met the same fate. An array of green leaves from the coffee shrub, the dragon-blood tree, the auracaria pine, the erythrina bush, the burao and the niaouli all lie strewn over the damp ground. Scattered here and there among them are branches of trees with shredded bark intermingled with blades of straw and bits of dead wood. The little hut used for storing food has collapsed over some forsaken bananas and taros. In quite a few places, pairs of *Achatina fulica* snails of various shapes and sizes are quietly biding their time with all the patience in the world.

Most of the banana trees in the vicinity, their foliage cracked, have flopped down on to their stems. The three coconut trees in this steep area have all lost their young bunches of green nuts. The solitary pandanus, whose long leaves were still being used to make the latest mats, also lies on the ground, a pitiful heap of entangled prickles. On the path leading to the field a little further up the mountain, the jackfruit trees have shed their fruit, which is now lying rotting like big, burst, wrinkled water-skins. We will have to clear

away the burao and niaouli branches blocking the path or cut them up with a machete.

Stuck to their stakes laid out along the ridge or in the ditch, the yam vines of various shades of green and purple have lost some of their lustre and now look like brutally uprooted weeds. Lower down, the large heart-shaped leaves of the water taro have all been torn and turned over on their silvery backs. But, true to their legendary tenacity, none of these taros have been dislodged. Another good sign is that the cordyline and the green coleus, symbols of life and fertility, have also held out despite being badly treated. The sweet potato patches are like bushes that have been scoured with a fine-tooth comb in search of some precious omen. Manioc roots lie broken here and there, with the remaining ones looking like stunted old shrubs.

Here, too, the banana trees seem to have fallen asleep on their stems, while the crests of the reeds dip down almost into the swelling river that has carried off all the shoots. As long as these waters remain dirty, we will have to think of collecting rainwater in the bucket and the old three-legged pot for drinking, coffee making and washing.

Washing ... the only problem is that the stream has also taken off with the pan, the soap and the mission dress that had been put out to dry on the rock below. It was afternoon when that violent headache began. In the evening, it started to thunder somewhere, a long way off, above the valley. During the night, lightning periodically pierced the heat that had suddenly become unbearable. The weather gradually became close, and a flight of frigate birds that had come from their island refuge appeared beneath the overcast sky on the next afternoon. Those great black birds from Walpole Island that let themselves be carried along by the wind are harbingers of cyclones. And then there was that old lady in rags who appeared in the night ...

The previous afternoon the old Âdi's nephews came on three separate occasions, as the storm was raging, to ask her to leave with them, because the weather forecast on the radio had already announced Warning No. 2 for tropical cyclone Gladys.¹⁷¹ Their aunt sent them away each time, saying that her hut would not fall in on her head and that the day had not yet come for her to die. She spent a sleepless night listening to the gusts of wind that accompanied the cyclone, wondering whether there was the slightest connection between the fact that the weather bureau always gave cyclones a female name and that strange apparition of the old lady in rags the night before, in the half-light of the hut coming from the tiny flame of her small blue lantern. She also prayed for the straw roof to stay firm and, sitting on a chair in a corner of the hut where there was no leak, implored the winds to calm down in the ritual language of bygone days.

At dawn when the storm abated, she went all covered in a faded piece of cloth to her nearest neighbours', a young couple. There was no one at home, however, as they must have sought refuge elsewhere. So she decided to wait there for the new day.

Having settled herself again on the packing case in the driest part of the hut, her wet cloth wrapped around her shoulders, she now wondered who she must look like the most — the old lady in rags or that grey chicken ruffling its drenched feathers in the far corner.

Where are you going, Mûû?

‘Where are you going, Mûû?’
‘I’m going to listen to the religious program on the radio at Âdi’s.’

‘All right, but don’t stay too long, because if your grandfather comes home drunk, he’ll be picking another fight with us and we’ll be forced to sleep outside again, you know.’

‘Yeah, yeah, Gèè. I’ll be back before him.’

My grandmother spat on the ground, took a firebrand and blew very hard on its white-hot point before rekindling her cigarette rolled in paper cut from those little bags that the Whites in the village give us for shoving our meagre purchases into. After casting a brief glance of resignation at me, she added, ‘Okay, then, off you go now.’

I raced off into the starry night with all the ardour of adolescence at the gates of life. I ran to the beach to seek shelter in Gilles’ arms, and he took me over to our spot, a bed of buffalo grass under some thick burao reeds.

I was safe, for that night, at least. I had let Âdi know so that she could confirm to Gran that I was indeed with her. As for Ao, I would still have time to overtake him, for we would hear him and his friends from far off, singing *tapéras* as was their wont whenever they came back to the village blind drunk. I was just hoping that he would keel over before finding a new excuse to bother us, Gran and me.

Whenever we took off in the direction of the coffee plantation or went down by the beach to suffer the mosquito bites, whenever we slept under the stars following one of those alcohol-induced scenes, I hated him terribly, but with one of those hates that would be quickly buried by sleep and the night. For as soon as dawn broke the next day my grandfather returned to his senses and, in his normal state, again became the best of men for both my gran and me.

Until the next binge, I did not tire of admiring his most beautiful yams or the huge lobsters that he would catch at night, along with the bag-fulls of trochus shells that he brought back from the little island. He also remained during this time the best performer of *pwârâ-pwa*¹⁷² and the most marvellous teller of *tâgadé*.¹⁷³ He was the most inspired of all the elders who knew our stories, and could relate our family histories. In those years, at least between his bouts of drunkenness, Ao¹⁷⁴ was my great pride and joy.

The secret meetings with Gilles went on for several months with the complicity of my cousin Âdi who always spun Gèè our line about the music or religious programs on the radio. The only killjoy during that whole period was my maternal cousin Téâ, Âdi's brother. He came up to me late one afternoon over by the mangrove as I was on my way back from the reef with a small basket of shellfish:

‘Âdi and you are really becoming the biggest liars around the place at the moment.’

‘Oh, really? How so?’

‘Last night, Gèè again told me that you were listening to the radio.’

‘Well, if you must know, we decided to go fishing in the dark with a torch before the program ended.’

‘There you go lying again, you can’t fool me, as I went torch fishing myself and didn’t come across you two anywhere.’

‘Oh, you don’t say! Anyway, I don’t see what business it is of yours.’

‘It’s none of my business. But the two of you are wasting your time running after young White guys. They’re only interested in black women as long as their get what they want from you. When they take you back to their place, it’s only to ditch you in the yard with their chooks, dogs and pigs. Once they’ve had their pleasure, they throw you away like old rags. When they’re among themselves in the light of day they look at you as if you’d got all the diseases in the world, even if they’ve just spent the whole night with you. Ao’s been drilling that into us for ages, but you still haven’t got it, have you? Well, I’m telling you again, just in case you’ve forgotten.’

I looked down at a tiny crab with huge red pincers running just in front of my toes that I was nervously wiggling, unable to stand the open, frank and direct look he gave me as he said all those things. Then he went on his way with the usual greeting.

‘Well, I’m going down to wait for the new tide coming in. See you later!’

While he quietly went off, I railed angrily at him and all the elders that our custom committed us to honour and respect on all occasions. But I quickly wiped away my tears of impotence a little further on, opposite our place, at the sight of Gran rolling her long green leaves of pandanus. She had just removed the prickly bits sitting on the silky *nûrûga*¹⁷⁵ lawn in the shade of the age-old banyan tree of Dui Nâmâpé, the ancestor descended from the mountain.

A few months later, towards the end of another afternoon, while I was piling up the dried coffee pickings and Gran was moving her plate of beans about blowing on them to get rid of the dust and dirt, she struck up a conversation.

‘Mûû, I would like to ask you something.’

'Yes, Gèè, what is it?'

'Are you seeing a boy?'

'No, of course not, Gèè, what an idea!'

'Look, my dear grandchild, I too was young once. We know what life is like for young people at your age, both girls and boys. You mustn't be afraid to tell me what happens to you.'

'But nothing's happening to me, Gèè, I'm telling you.'

'Yes there is. I've been watching you these past few days and you've often looked quite tired to me. Isn't our moon, our women's sickness, out of cycle with you?'

'Euh, that is ... I ...'

'Has your moon stopped?'

'Yes, Gèè, it has.'

'Since when, do you know?'

'About a month ago.'

'And who is the boy?'

Gran went through the list of all the young men in the community and surrounding areas for whom the custom authorised amorous relations with me, but to no avail. I didn't want to say anything yet. I didn't dare to. I was very afraid without really knowing why or of what.

Two weeks later, Gilles' parents threw a party in his honour on their vast property adjoining the reserve. He was getting engaged, before his departure for military service, to one of the F. sisters who were his childhood friends and who usually spent their holidays with him. He had often told me that he actually regarded them as his very own sisters.

It was the day before that evening that we saw each other for the last time. Actually, I wanted to know what it all meant for our relationship and especially for me, in my state. He merely repeated that it was his parents who had decided his engagement for him. Nothing about what might have happened between us.

I cannot say whether it was bitterness, shame, disgust or simply my condition, but I vomited a lot that night. Then my grandmother took up the subject again. This time, given the way things were for me, I came clean about it all.

The next day at dawn she ordered me to keep an empty stomach before taking me far up in the creek where there is a big waterhole with enormous evergreen wild taros. They had been planted ages ago by the *u*¹⁷⁶ ladies of the spot. There, on a large and perfectly smooth stone with rounded edges, she made me drink a potion of leaves and soaked bark. She began by massaging my tummy, then the lower part of my back, before pouring a few more drops of the liquid on my head. Her movements were all accompanied by ritual incantations. When we got back home, she recommended that I lie down for the whole day while waiting for the moon to reappear.

In the afternoon, Gran met up with the women from our community who had to prepare the *bougnas* for the guests of Gilles and his parents, while the men were busy with the wood and meat for the roasts, the spit and a rack of lamb. As her predictions about my getting back to normal turned out to be true, I hardly went out of our hut. Âdi was to tell me that it was Gèè herself who put the most superb *bougna*, intended for Gilles and his fiancée, on the big table between the rose petals and the sparkling cutlery. Then she quickly went away in her mission dress of red silk and matching sleeve lacework. A delicate bellflower of hibiscus of the same lustre with speckled white spots was pinned to the bamboo comb in her white frizzy tuft of hair. I can still imagine her without any trouble, a frail and furtive silhouette stealing away from that fabulous setting whose flashiness has been eating away at our lives for far too long already.

During the ball that livened things up that evening, Gilles, who was completely drunk, began to vomit, grabbing his throat as he did so, before being taken to his room.

‘No! No! Don’t strangle me!’ he shouted, seemingly prey to some intense terror.

‘He’s had too much to drink’, was the conclusion some came to. He ended up by falling asleep. At dawn, his fiancée, who had danced the night away, found him stretched out on his back, lying sideways across the bed. His bulging eyes appeared to express the same boundless terror, while all his fingers were clutching at his throat, as if he had strangled himself.

Two years later, on the occasion of the customary wedding uniting Téâ and me, Grandfather recited the traditional speech that returned me to the maternal relatives. Grandmother, delighted as she was with this marriage, sang and danced a good deal during the *pilou*, repeating over and over in Ajië, ‘*Nâ da nêvâ xinyâ rhoa! Nâ tö mwât nêvâ xinyâ!*’,¹⁷⁷ in tune to her steps. For the occasion she put on one last time her splendid red silk dress with matching lace that, towards the end of the following year, overcome with sorrow, I was to place among the gifts to the maternal relatives who had come to collect her after her death.

She was to devote the final months of her life to pampering me, at the same time as reminding me of certain old prohibitions affecting a pregnant woman and without forgetting to give me advice about the curative plants and barks for the use of young mothers. She would mollycoddle our eldest son Dui even more during the first few months of his life.

Grandfather was to leave us three years later. One night, after having downed the last bottle of red that he had brought from the village, he fell peacefully asleep, never to wake again.

Dui is now 18 years old. This evening, he came home with his young cousin Bwëé, Âdi's son. They are back from an occupation of land at settler F's place organised by the local representatives of the independence movement.¹⁷⁸ Téâ went with a few elders and other activists to the neighbouring community where a meeting to appraise this political action is to be held.

Among the faded old photos that Dui picked up on that disputed property, and which he showed me when he got home, is one of a young man, with this carelessly written dedication on the back, 'To M., in memory of Gilles, 10/10/63'. I had given it back to him the last night we met, the only thing he had ever deigned to surrender to me.

Case Closed

The young officer had great trouble trying to remember the soft face of his mother or father. His efforts to recall the features of some of his closest friends similarly ran into a sort of haze, like the kind you can sometimes see early in the morning drifting above the river on that distant island where his parents had made their fortune. As a small boy there, he loved to lean up against the trunk of an ancient banyan tree¹⁷⁹ in the park at the bottom of the family property and see what he imagined to be magic carpets sailing by, finely spun by a fairy using reel upon reel of white wool. At such times he was Aladdin stretched out on his intangible fleecy bed, and the first rays of sunlight quite simply rekindled the flickers of his marvellous lamp that he would take with him on his travels through the world.

The trunk of that old banyan tree also had something very peculiar that he could see clearly again now, a side where its tangled roots had formed the shape of a woman sitting, her arm folded over her bowed forehead, as if to hide or wipe away her tears. Another excrescence of the trunk seemed to be the outstretched arm of a man making as if to console someone, with the tree being his body. It was to those strange creatures of nature that he would relate his peregrinations, like Aladdin travelling with the sun. Still today, he wondered what attracted him most to that old tree, the natural statues formed

by its roots or the morning mist over the river. The uncanny image of the frozen couple haunted his feverish mind for a long time before giving way to a vision in which Marguerite's features were so clear that his wounded fingers desperately freed themselves from the muddy snow of Verdun to touch and caress an invisible face. Oh! If only he could block his nostrils so that he could no longer breathe, no longer smell that stench of burned flesh engulfing him!

It was in the shade of the old banyan tree that he first met Marguerite. When the rumours reached them of an impending mobilisation for the Great War in Europe, the most prosperous families of the island organised or improvised all manner of parties, perhaps in an effort to deceive themselves and keep the illusion that this conflict only concerned them at a distance and would not take their appointed heirs away. From picnics and cocktail parties to dinners and balls, the merry-go-round had ended up dragging his parents into its irresistible wake, one capable of averting fate, perhaps. They decided to throw the most wonderful party of their whole lives to celebrate their 25 years of marriage. This was as good a way as any to keep the first clash of arms at bay. The whole property was spruced up over several weeks thanks to the work of the nearest tribe. The grand colonial house, all repainted and with hedges trimmed and lawn freshly cut, welcomed the guests who had come from afar the previous day to drown, if only for a day, their fear at having to leave behind a mine, plantation or business to respond to a call that most of them could well have done without. The parents were themselves hoping for a last-minute engagement and, why not, an 11th hour wedding that would enable them to get hold of such and such an inheritance. As for the heir to the place himself, he will¹⁸⁰ not forget in a hurry either the celebrations or the emotions of that marvellous day.

From early morning, the gravel of the pathways grated under the steps of couples admiring the foliage, groups of adolescent boys joking noisily and young girls, hand in hand, gaily gossiping. Girls in white dresses, ribbons floating in the wind, boys in navy-blue outfits. A whole little world of nicely pulled-up socks that added its rhythms to the trills of birds by dancing a ring-around-the-trees. Parades of multicoloured parasols, polished laced-up boots, feather hats, flowers and fruit brought jollity to the huge park. A black-ribboned gondolier, a brilliant pipe, a waist-coast fob pocket, a skipping rope, a lace handkerchief, the tiny diamonds of a veil covering a forehead, these would all remain encrusted symbols of this day, for later, for a memory shrouded in snow. There were others too, like the long pearl necklaces over a firm bosom, a glove nimbly removed, an elegant figure clad in a long silky train of dress, a hand studded with precious stones resting on the golden knob of a closed parasol planted in the ground, the folds of a pale-blue fan revealing small pink and wild roses beneath certain smiles laden with promises. Aladdin himself, all decked out in party gear, who had seen a thing or two on his travels around the world perched high up on his carpet of haze and in the solar light of his magic lamp, was astounded by this fairy-like atmosphere on the family property.

The fine wines that flowed in abundance at meal-time ended up going to his head, when he thought he heard a whining or crying sound, he couldn't make out which very clearly, down by the old banyan tree. He went over to see what it was and was somewhat surprised to discover, sitting on the bench his father had put there a few years earlier, a young girl in a long white dress. This unexpected apparition completely dispelled the sobbing sound that he thought he had heard. A shudder ran across the back of his neck and down his spine giving him goose-bumps, something he put down to the heady

beverages he had imbibed during the meal. At his approach, she smiled and then held out a white-gloved hand that he raised to his lips.

‘Miss ...?’ he asked, introducing himself.

‘Marguerite.’

He hardly paid any notice to the fact that the young girl had not told him her full name, puzzled as he was by the folded white parasol resting next to her.

‘That looks like the parasol we have up in our attic.’

‘That is indeed where I found it,’ she answered with an amused twinkle in her eye.

‘Are you poking fun at me?’

‘Let’s just say that I like to play little tricks on the living, I mean those living it up.’

The conversation went on in this playful vein for a few moments, and the young man began to want to inspect her hands too, when an old servant, one who had no peer in fishing eels from the river, came with his granddaughter to tell him that his mother was calling him. As he wished to see the young woman again, but she was unable to stay until the evening because of a sick aunt, they agreed to meet at a reception for the future servicemen that would be put on in the coming days by the Mayor of Noumea. When he went back to his mother and asked her what she wanted to talk to him about, she was surprised by the question, and concluded that the old man must have misinterpreted her orders. It was just then that her only son and heir felt something sticking to his fingers and, looking down, discovered some drying banyan sap.

The reception duly took place, and the two young people met up again in a packed hall where officers in uniform and beautiful women in evening gowns gaily paraded and graciously waltzed. Their meeting was very brief, as Marguerite, particularly elegant in a stunning corolla of very fine silk, her

hands carefully covered in superb white gloves, again had to go to her aunt's bedside. Just as she was about to steal away, she whispered her address to the dashing soldier. As the day for departure grew ever nearer, he tried several times to locate this address, but to no avail. He ended up by convincing himself that he must have misunderstood her words amid all the *brouhaha* of the reception. In any case, he already regarded her as his fiancée, the one he would marry on his return home from the war. Accordingly, he went to see his family's notary to make Marguerite heiress to his entire fortune, in the event of his not coming back.

As the liner left the wharf, he caught sight of the young girl, right there in the front row, among the well-wishers waving their hands or wiping their tears away as they bid farewell, adieu to their loved ones. And there she was, with her gloved hands resting on the knob of a white parasol — the one from the attic, he would swear to it now — standing perfectly upright and still, dressed in black from top to toe. Yet what he now made out quite distinctly was a haughty brow on a face staring hard at him, and painted lips drawn back in a triumphant grin. Then he blinked several times till his eyes became moist, as now, instead of Marguerite, there was a young Melanesian woman from times gone by, her traditional skirt tied simply around her waist. She was pouring forth hot tears and vigorously waving her hands from which, in a flash, tiny flames came leaping up in light grey twirls. He quivered at a fleeting smell of burnt flesh that suddenly pierced his nostrils. She was sitting in exactly the same position as the tangled roots of the old tree at the bottom of the family park. An old man looking for all the world like the eel fisherman was standing beside her and seemed to be telling her words of comfort followed by a soothing movement of his hand. On the deck of the ship that gradually sailed away, the soldier thought

he could hear the same sobbing sound that he had heard down by the old banyan tree.

A few years after the end of the war, a journalist made inquiries of several people likely to provide him with information about the life of the officers from the island who, in the hallowed expression, had died on the field of honour. To his amazement, he discovered that Marguerite, the sole heir of that only son who had died at Verdun, had absolutely the same identity as a young girl burned alive in a fire that had destroyed her parents' house during the revolt that had shaken the island some 35 years before the outbreak of the Great War.¹⁸¹

II

The Japanese navy was swarming all over the Coral Sea. The American captain¹⁸² had arrived with a few others that morning at the enormous property that had been turned into a military camp since the start of the war. For the past few months he had been regularly meeting up with a group of French officers there to take stock of the situation, get some supplies or receive the latest orders from his superiors. This spot had somehow become his base on the island and, as the days went by, he had come to appreciate it more and more. He had written a poetic description of it in one of his recent letters to his fiancée, a childhood friend who had become a reporter and to whom, a dozen or so years before, he liked to confide his first sonnets of dreamy adolescence. In the same missive, he had asked her to include this long poem with others that he hoped to publish later, in a collection he would entitle *Pacific Memories*. In it, the full moon would shine over the silvery sea

and the fascinating Southern Cross would announce the dawn, its first glimmers lighting up a coral atoll on the horizon. To this lyric masterwork he now added a huge colonial homestead with garret-red roof, white walls and veranda, drowsy under the mauve ipomeas and pink bougainvilleas.

The flowering of the taboo wood and coffee plants gave off a spell-like scent of jasmine at dusk. The immense park in which the auracaria pines rubbed shoulders with arborescent ferns and palm cabbages showed off its avenues lined with hibiscus shrubs of many colours. And then, down there at the bottom of the park, there was that age-old tree that embraced you in its shade. This was particularly intoxicating on afternoon naps, when the murmur of the stream and rustle of a light breeze in the bamboo softly sang their airs like ancient lullabies. But what most attracted the American officer was that entanglement of roots forming a human couple on the trunk of the old banyan tree, a man offering consolation with his fingertips to a woman sitting and weeping, her right elbow folded over her eyes. At least that was the first image that had sprung to his mind at the sight of this botanical phenomenon.

Before the war, the captain had been an anthropology student at the University of Boston. He had been particularly interested in the peoples of the Pacific, and had made a long trip through Papua New Guinea, the Solomons and Fiji in search of Melanesian stories in preparation for his thesis. It was partly on account of his training as an anthropologist, his knowledge of Pacific islanders and also the fact that he could speak fluent French that his superiors had sent him to the island's interior. In his rare moments of relaxation, he would seek out the company of local-born soldiers capable of telling him about their customs, legends and stories. His natural inclination, combined with his gifts for poetry and languages, had no doubt helped him a great deal to understand them.

As a result, he drew inspiration from them, as, with each passing day, they became more and more part of his very being. The fascination that the suffering couple under the old banyan tree had exerted over him had been such that he had sworn to uncover the particular legend or story behind it before his imminent departure. Indeed, a note from headquarters in Noumea had just informed him that his next destination would probably be Guadalcanal in the Solomons.

Without really knowing why or how, the captain had come to be certain about the identity of the person who would tell him the story of this couple rooted in suffering. It was that old eel fisherman from the tribe closest to the camp, who had already related several local stories about the place to him. In fact, only the previous day the old man had, on his request, translated into French the first name of his granddaughter who was constantly by his side. She was called Cindere-Fingers. However, that afternoon under the tree, just as he was beginning to ask him about it, he felt a kind of reticence in the old man who kept on staring at him, in a questioning or even prying way, something that he had never seen before. Then from out of nowhere there suddenly appeared the young girl herself, dressed in a greenish-coloured cloth that blended with the surrounding vegetation, who had come to call the fisherman. The soldier, lost in thought, watched them disappear in a flash along a narrow path into the nearby coffee field. He then heard footsteps from behind.

‘Good afternoon, Captain. It’s a beautiful day, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Hello, Lieutenant. To tell the truth, you gave me a bit of a start ...’

‘Oh! I’m very sorry to have disrupted the flow of your thoughts, but I was looking for a shady spot myself where I could rest a little after our long outing this morning.’

‘Are you being called back to Noumea, too?’

‘Yes, I am. And as we had to leave the North very early, I was feeling rather beat.’

With her¹⁸³ medallions as a lieutenant in the American army, the doctor did not appear at all to be in the state that she described. On the contrary, she reminded the captain of Sleeping Beauty as she awoke, ready to exert all the energy that had been pent up during her timeless slumber. He told her as much.

‘If with my head as it is and in this outfit, you’re saying that I look like Sleeping Beauty, then I can’t see any reason why I shouldn’t in turn take you for Prince Charming.’

Was it this reference to the famous fairy-tale, or the magic of the place or the sun’s radiance that day that suddenly reduced everything he had experienced prior to that chance encounter to nothing? Or was it quite simply that brief, mysterious glint that he thought he could detect in the young woman’s smiling and mischievous¹⁸⁴ eyes, which erased everything else from the soldier’s mind that early afternoon?

Margaret, who came from San Francisco, had always been fascinated by islands. Before serving on Guam, and later Ponape in Micronesia, she had visited the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico, Cuba and Jamaica. But for the rest of her days she will¹⁸⁵ remember the captivating melody of the waves on the beach at Honolulu. She was at Pearl Harbor at the time of the Japanese attack, in which she lost the man she was to marry, someone who shared that passion for life, that *joie de vivre* of islanders that made her forget the inhuman sadness of the great continental cities. No, the song of the sea would never have the ring of death for her. Yet death had suddenly burst out of a serene sky in the small hours of the morning, even if it was from another island, the Land of the Rising Sun, that those bombers had taken off. But that tragedy, however

violent, did not take one iota away from her love. At no time did her soldier's and doctor's uniform become a suit of armour or protective shell. She carried on calmly in the vocation to which she had felt herself drawn from her earliest youth, that of consoling and caring for others.

The officer could not say for how long the aura of the old banyan tree cut them off from the outside world. They now looked like two lovers on a desert island, seemingly transported there at their behest by some pleasure boat with sails. Maybe they also called to mind the first human couple in all the local legends and cosmogonies. To tell the truth, it was the lieutenant doctor calling the shots to a captain who was, to say the least, spellbound under her sway in this magic intimate enclosure. Her luminous smile and constant flow of bewitching words ended up reducing him to nothing. She sang to him of her particular fondness for the Pacific islands, of her poignant nostalgia for gipsy violins she had heard on a visit to Paris with her parents, and of the devilish rhythm of the gipsy guitars around a campfire on a pilgrimage to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.¹⁸⁶ She took him off to New York for a great jazz concert in Carnegie Hall where Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington outdid each other in virtuosity. She crafted Negro spirituals and gospels for him as a tribute to Ella Fitzgerald and the unforgettable Lady Blues, Bessie Smith. They threw seeds to the pigeons in Saint Mark's Square in Venice before gently sailing off in a gondola to wake up in the fabulous gardens of the Alhambra in Grenada. They danced the Brazilian samba at the Carnival in Rio and the Cuban rumba in Havana, with a cigar between their lips in the style of Ernest Hemingway. That war correspondent, writer and volunteer on the side of the Republicans in the recent Spanish Civil War, who now figured among the authors of the so-called 'lost generation' along with Dos Passos, Faulkner and Steinbeck, was one of her

favourites. However, her absolute preference went of course to the greatest author of all in English literature, William Shakespeare. Time and again she read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest* and others. She remembered playing Ophelia to much acclaim in a university production, and asked the captain if the two of them weren't at that very moment two characters from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The officer was happy to admit as much, and in fact would have accepted any suggestion at all and believed the slightest word that continued to enchain him to her in that timeless world. Yet, at the precise moment when he wanted to know why she kept her surgeon's gloves on, a black soldier came to call the doctor away for the departure to Noumea. They agreed to see each other again in the coming days in the capital, and thereupon she bade him goodbye. He was surprised that a bit of banyan sap had stuck to his thumb and he stared after the couple, with the question about the gloves still on the tip of his tongue. The marked features and carefree demeanour of the young orderly had an air of familiarity that reminded him of someone he knew. He then thought he could hear the sound of someone sobbing over by the coffee field. Cindered-Fingers must have been scolded by her grandfather for some minor misdemeanour.

It was this old man, whom the soldier strangely resembled, who had now disappeared with the doctor down the winding path. In fact, he could be his grandson, his younger son, his very young brother, or the old fisherman himself some 40 years before.

When the captain got back to Noumea, he received a letter from the medical practitioner informing him that she was taking off for the Solomons before him and that she was very much counting on seeing him again soon somewhere on

the island of Guadalcanal. He made the most of those last days of grace to put some order into his papers including signing ones that, in the event of his not returning from the war, will¹⁹⁴ bequeath to Margaret the entire, immense Bostonian fortune to which he was heir.

He boarded a navy plane whose engines and propeller were now spinning at maximum speed for a take-off. Forgetting all the reports clearly indicating the advances made by the Japanese air force and navy in the Coral Sea and the devastation that they had wreaked there, the captain could think only of meeting up with Margaret again at the end of his journey. He cast a final glance through the window, and then he saw her, in the direct line of the light of the new day dawning, only a few metres from the plane. There she was, standing on the dirt runway, dressed in a dark tailor-made ensemble with matching shoes. She stared at him with a wicked gaze and a triumphant smile on her lips, before openly taking off her surgeon's gloves one after the other. Small flames leapt furtively up from her hands only to turn at once into thin air. She showed him her frightfully burned hands before being metamorphosed right before his very eyes into a young Melanesian woman sitting in an old-fashioned frock, desperately waving her blistered palms about, her face scarred by suffering and her eyes obstinately riveted on his.

The wrinkled hand of an old man wearing a penis holder was gently stroking her head in consolation. He was the exact replica, if not the twin brother, of the eel fisherman. Then, through the throbbing of the engines, the officer heard a weeping sound, the same one that had come from the coffee plantation, and he smelled the smell of burnt flesh. The couple froze in the same attitude as that of the entwined roots of the old banyan tree, as the plane started down the runway for take-off. The captain could not hold back a shiver, but he put all

these visions down to an overwhelming fatigue and an imagination that had been amply fed on Melanesian legends, tales and stories these past few months. He would talk about it to Margaret waiting for him over in Honiara.

She did not come to greet him on his arrival there. He immediately went in search of her among all the medical teams on the island, but no one had seen or even heard of her. Yet, he did not despair of finding her again, thinking that she must have been transferred to a special assignment at the last minute, or even sent on some secret mission. Anything could happen in wartime.

The battle of the Solomons had been raging for a few hours. Bloodstained grains of sand from the endless beach at Guadalcanal stuck to the forehead of the captain who was now suffocating beneath the unbearable stench of his totally incinerated face. Beyond the indescribable pain, Margaret's image merged with that of the banyan tree couple.

Much later, the journalist who had been the captain's childhood sweetheart and now fiancée discovered in her research that the identity of the medical practitioner who had become his sole heir was that of an American woman killed with her fiancé a year before, during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

III

The young NCO's stay on his native island was due to end that day, and he would take off again for other skies to soak up even warmer climates and experience new adventures. He would once more abide by the uncompromising discipline of the old barracks before finding himself landed from one day to the

next in one of the hot spots of the Middle East or Africa. Yet again, he would throw himself body and soul into that exciting life that had been his these past few years, in Kolwezi, Ndjamená and Beirut, where the crack parachute troops were sent to defend French interests via third countries. He got used to this frantic pace of fighting that now tormented him with its throbbing, insistent call. He was chaffing at the bit, just like on the eve of every departure.

He rediscovered some of the same wild willingness to charge head-first into a reckless venture with no quarter given, which had driven him when he first decided to enlist in the army. After leaving school with his Intermediate Certificate, he had tried his hand at a number of odd jobs here and there with a couple of buddies. By turns, he had been deliveryman, bricklayer and the like, until the day when one of his cousins took him to spend a few months in their tribe. There he met his first love in the person of a sweet young girl of about the same age. She also loved him for a while, before preferring his cousin. He took it on the chin, but without being able to forget her. She later got married to the cousin, but died in childbirth with their first child. In the heart of the young man who had been dropped, hatred then started to distil its venom against the cousin who was now a widower. Our young man fled to Nouméa and joined the army. Later, on his many tours of duty, he would get to know many other women, but these were passing flings virtually devoid of feeling.

That afternoon, under the banyan tree, that whole part of him he thought was completely buried with the death of the young woman in childbirth now came flooding back without warning, like a wound that had never healed and was opening up again. Even the excitement of departure didn't manage to stop it. He let himself be gently swayed, overcome by a profound sadness and nostalgia in seeing the eel fisherman

and his granddaughter pass by on the river, calm and still on their bamboo raft. He thought of the choice bits they wouldn't fail to bring back to him in the camp that evening, and it already made his mouth water. He saw himself as a young kid again, trying hard with the help of a long rod to get a raft identical to theirs to go forward, but it was far too big for him.

The surrounding coffee field also took him back to a harvest season long since past when he loved to suck on the sweet taste of the ripe, red cherries of coffee and, under the shade of the coffee plants, sing at the top of his voice to chase away his childish fears. He gave himself up to this completely, with an intense joy at the surprising intoxication that penetrated his every pore and took hold of his whole being. At long last he got back what he had been missing and had kept repressed beneath his uniform wherever he went — the land, nature, complete communion with the animate and inanimate world. Down on the river, the raft with grandfather and granddaughter had disappeared. Perhaps it had moored somewhere close by.

The noise of small broken branches being snapped behind him caught him unawares. He turned around and there she was again. The young girl standing before him was the perfect double, if not indeed the actual twin, of the parturient woman who had disappeared. She was wearing thick silk baggy pants¹⁸⁷ in a sort of chestnut colour over an old pair of worn-out Adidas shoes.

'You gave me a fright,' he said. 'I was trying to see if the old fisherman's raft had moored around here.'

'I too was afraid when I saw you. I thought that the place was deserted as usual. I was about to go back.'

'Where were you going?'

'To get some wood from the coffee field.'

'But we're quite a long way from the tribe here. There's no wood left close by.'

‘Yes, there is. But I generally come here and rest in this clearing, under this old banyan tree. I feel at home here.’

‘You’re not afraid of the paratroopers? The camp is just over the way. You can almost see the guard post from here.’

‘No. I’m not scared of them at all. What can they do to me? It’s rather you who should be afraid of them, as you’re wearing their uniform.’

‘I’m from around here.’

‘That’s what I mean.’

‘Are you trying to blame me for something?’

‘Much more than that. You should be ashamed.’

‘Go easy, don’t start judging me straight away. It’s not as simple as all that.’

‘It’s perfectly clear, though. If I were in your shoes, this uniform would burn my skin after all that’s happened around here. What’s more, if you take my advice, you’ll give it up before it’s too late.’

‘But that’s impossible, come on! I can’t do it just like that. What’s more, I’ve got to leave again tomorrow.’

‘That’s just it, it’s now or never for you to get rid of that traitor’s skin. Give up this renegade’s uniform! It’s time for you to join up with us again and come back home for good. You can do it, right here and now, under this banyan tree whose invincible roots are your own. Take a look at this couple that has come from them! Don’t you recognise us there? Why, we are this couple! They are ageless and will always be so. But why don’t you want to believe me? Ah, yes, I understand. You’re still afraid of them, your paratroopers and your superiors. So have our proud warriors all become cowards or blind to everything like you guys?’

‘Hey, hang on a minute, you’re really upset with me somehow, I can see that. And yet we don’t even know each other. Maybe now’s the time for introductions. What’s your name?’

‘Maguy.’

She also gave a surname that the NCO immediately registered in his suddenly feverish brain. He wanted to check whether or not she was wearing a wedding ring, but the young girl’s arms were all covered, from her shoulders right down to the tips of her fingers in a sort of light and coloured cape, with a painted cloth tied at the waist. He then declared to her, point-blank:

‘I told you that I had to leave tomorrow. I have to go back to the camp now to settle some urgent business with a superior. But I won’t leave without seeing you again. I’ll fix it so that I go out this evening with a patrol and I’ll be back here in this very spot at 10 o’clock sharp. And if I have to, I’ll wait here all night long for you.’

‘I’ll still be here as always under this banyan tree. Now I have to fetch some wood for the fire.’

A turtle-dove was modulating its doleful sound somewhere above them. The pastel tones of the afternoon drawing to a close and the scent of the coffee plants in bloom added to the sweet intoxication that had suddenly taken hold of the young soldier. The girl silently cut a path between the languid ferns in the undergrowth, before nimbly disappearing into the coffee field, her arms and hands still carefully wrapped in the brightly coloured cloth. When the soldier went to pick some of the wild strawberries among all the red ones that were on offer there in the half-light, he got a surprise to see a stain of dried banyan sap stuck to his thumb, and he rubbed it with his forefinger as he made his way back to the camp.

The field officer of whom he made the request to modify certain arrangements concerning the totality of his funds in the bank thought he had a strange air about him. He was genuinely perplexed when the sergeant appointed Maguy as his sole heir, in her capacity as his fiancée. Nowhere in the

file of this Melanesian NCO, who had been closely watched since their arrival on the island, was there a mention of this relationship.

‘We didn’t know that you had such a connection here, sergeant.’

‘It’s a customary one, an engagement that has been arranged by our families and clans, in line with our traditions, Captain.’

‘You really surprise me there, sergeant. I didn’t know that you had such respect for your customs. Fortunately, we’re leaving tomorrow, as the stay here obviously isn’t doing you much good. Anyway, I’m taking note of all this and authorise you to sign it, since I’m sure that once you’re back in France proper, you’ll have second thoughts about it and will change it back, won’t you?’

The sergeant signed with his eyes closed. The captain’s concerns weren’t his at all. Soon, he would be outside of the camp with the patrol. Never would he have counted the seconds and minutes so much, even in the times of gravest danger in his life as a parachutist. The call of the night was tormenting him. At five to 10, he had himself dropped off by the patrol opposite the track leading to the old banyan tree.

He walked briskly by the full moon that lit up the path beneath the sleeping ferns, hearing in the distance the shrieking calls of a sultan chicken that had woken up. He fumbled around in one of his pockets for the square piece of silk and the small flask of perfume that he would give to Maguy as a pledge. Under the banyan tree it was quite dark, with a few faint rays of moonlight here and there.

The girl appeared to him in a luminous halo, dressed simply in a traditional frock. She had one wreath of taboo wood girding her forehead, while others were hanging around her neck and covering her breasts. Still others served as a very

elegant sleeve for her. Under the fragrant emanations that began to make him swoon, he was thrilled by this ravishing vision who gently restrained his violent desire to approach her.

‘No. Don’t burn with impatience or be afraid of anything. Now we have the whole night ahead of us. All these corollas in full-bloom that are discharging their scented dew in the clear moonlight are yours. All I have to give you is the exquisite perfume of the taboo wood flowers. I have nothing, as I am nothing. Nothing but a dream of the full moon. Yet you told them that I was your promised girl from back home. So it will be, I will be your customary wife, since you have come to our meeting-place under this old banyan tree. Yes, the promise of a wedding whispered to the fire girl in this spot, under other moons, will finally be realised. Look, the fire virgin danced in just this way to the full moon on the hard blue stone, where the waters meet between the red mountains. Beneath the stone, the fire of the earth gave life back to her calf muscles, while out of the sky the fire of thunder illuminated her soul.

‘Her grandfather, the old fisherman, tamed all the eels of the river which became the fire girl’s faithful daily messengers, whether under the most scorching of suns, in the heaviest rain, the wildest wind, the most devastating cyclone or the flood that sweeps away everything before it. From the confines of the forest to the gardens of the lagoon, from the huts of the upper valley to the shelters of the marine atolls, they coiled and uncoiled and preserved his ageless words like so many sublime black pearls of our exchange “money” sealing our alliances. The eel fisherman sang the lullabies of the stars and the chants of men to his granddaughter. He detailed to her the names of all the minerals, plants and animals that were symbols of the clans. He initiated her into the endemic gestures of healing with plants, vines, barks and leaves. He read to her the signs of the day and the night, the images of dreams

and the messages of nature. He unveiled the portents of life and the omens of death to her. She was dedicated to the lightning, the thunder, the fire of heaven and earth. No man should or could approach her. The priestess of fire was taboo.

‘Then came that night of the full moon, when the stranger in a striped uniform on guard in the mining mountains surprised the dance of the fire girl on the water stone. He secretly bore the rhythm, memory and burden of it through many months and moons. The forbidden vestal virgin haunted his lonely nights prey to insomnia. When the elders began to tie the grass of war to the wood of nocturnal *pilous*, the officer managed to be assigned guard duty over the fire girl who had been taken as a hostage to ensure the neutrality of her people. He promised the eel fisherman that nothing would happen to them and that his granddaughter would be treated with all due respect. One starry night, she danced for him alone on the blue stone where he took her unto him. They then wandered about until they came here to the old banyan tree, where they stuck their thumbs together with some sap to seal their sacrilegious union.

‘The following day, the priestess discovered some panic-stricken eels out of water lying dying on the pebbles. Bunches of green flies were swarming about them in a buzz. The fateful smell of the ladybird split the air. Her grandfather had also inhaled that smell along the night tracks during a disturbing dream. A thousand portents of mourning were springing up around the huts in spite of the promise of the stranger who was now very busy each day keeping company with Marguerite, a young woman from his very own part of the country here, down under the old banyan tree. There they would chat and joke and sometimes burst out laughing and hold each other tight. The fire girl spied and surprised them in this position, but they didn’t give a damn. When they left, she

came to sob in despair. The elder could no longer find any words comforting enough to take away his granddaughter's shame, soothe her anger or overcome the hatred that had devastated her to the point of making her completely mute.

'At the height of the insurrection, reprisals were exacted against the eel fisherman's whole tribe, some of whose members had gone over to the rebels' side. All that remained of the tribal village were some smoking hillocks and heaps of ashes. Some time afterwards, the officer's engagement to Marguerite was celebrated in great style, as a kind of prelude to the victory against the rebels. Once the night had come, the priestess slipped furtively into the fiancée's family home where everyone was sleeping, to set it alight. For her, this was like a real wedding night, like that long night that still awaits us, our wedding night, since you, my dear,¹⁸⁸ have come to marry me, as before, here under the old banyan tree. Everyone asleep in the house, including Marguerite and the officer who had promised to give the priestess all his gold, perished in the blaze. The fire girl burnt her fingers in it, and so it is that ever since that night, I have been called Maguy-Cindered-Fingers.'

All smiles, she then furtively went up to the distracted young man to put her wreaths of taboo wood flowers around his forehead and neck. The next morning, when his regiment was about to leave, he was found dead, lying face down under the old banyan tree, his forehead and neck completely burned.

The field officer, in front of whom he had signed the papers regarding an inheritance in the event of his death, was to learn from the bank that the sergeant himself, on the afternoon of the day he died, had withdrawn the entirety of his funds. As to the surname of his heir, it signified Cindered-Fingers in the local language, but did not correspond to any of the clan names from the area. Only a young girl, the granddaughter of an old eel fisherman who would sometimes

come and sell his catch in the camp, bore this nickname inherited from an ancestor who had burned her hands in a fire long ago.

For the captain of the paratroopers, this was last-minute business. He had received his orders for repatriation to France, and so had other things on his mind. He wasn't going to waste his time initiating inquiries about what he called humbug. Someone put forward the view that, considering the background of this NCO with a good record, and also taking account of the trust that had always been placed in him, despite the 'troubles' of the time, his disappearance should result in a more thorough-going inquiry or at the very least warranted an explanation, to which the captain replied:

'It's up to his family to ask for this sort of thing, not our job.'

To someone else, who claimed that if the matter was not resolved the situation risked getting even worse in that already very troubled part of the country, he said, 'Come on, Lieutenant, do I have to remind you that we don't get mixed up in politics?' To a third officer who dared recall that, even so, similar kinds of strange rumours had been circulating over the past few months about some police officers who had happened to stray off into a forest, he retorted dryly, 'But, this is crazy, can't you all see that, you guys! And you're not going to get into this either, is that clear? That'd be all we need. No, no, no, how many times do I have to tell you? It's all settled. I'm sorry, gentlemen, these are my orders. The case is closed.'

The Ferryman

‘Take this ring, she is offering it to you. Make sure you look after it as a memento of us. Now we have to go back, as it will soon be daylight. Do you hear? It’s already the first cockcrow.’

I did understand what she meant, and saw them stealing furtively away along the embankment towards the river mouth in the manner of old Kanak couples, the man in front, the woman a few paces behind. But were they really walking? They seemed rather to be floating on the tall grass of the shore. Then suddenly, at the level of the retaining wall of the bridge down below, they gently slipped into the misty dawn-grey water, right into the middle of a ballet of sharks’ fins. In a flash, the time it took for the second cock cry to tickle my eardrums, here they are again now in front of me, holding out the silver ring to me on their entwined fingertips. When I went to grab hold of it, my fingers locked with theirs through a sort of invisible glue. That’s when I was woken up, as the echo of the third cockcrow poured forth its continuous deafening ring, thumping my temples.

I opened my eyes on to the green bamboo shoots that were sagging overhead and whose foliage had sheltered me for a part of the night. I was lying flat on my stomach on a bed of dried bamboo leaves, my head resting on my folded left forearm, snuggled up into my old parka, a remnant of my years

of military service and drudgery long ago in France. How often had I ended up with a hangover at the entrance to an underground station, on a railway bench or under a bridge? I chanced a look downstream under the bridge that had been proudly straddling the river for the past few years, to make sure that those who had offered me the silver ring had indeed stepped out of a dream that finished like a nightmare. Nothing but a light mist passed over the surface of the water. You would have said it was poorly concealing a shark fin, or was it perhaps my senses that had become blurred on account of my overdoing it during the night? Muted sounds of *taperas* and *kaneka* wafted up to me, as a stream of cars negotiated the bridge from where voices, cassette players and horns livening up the return from a party pierced the silence of the dawn.

I too had come back from this celebration a few hours earlier. The previous afternoon, I'd got rather sloshed with a group of brothers, cousins and other relatives from the tribe downing quite a few glasses of cheap grog, double-barrelled beer cans and the like,¹⁸⁹ as well as puffing on quite a few joints. As one thing led to another, we gradually got the idea to go over to the fairground, whose program was advertised on the shop doors and other busy places in the area. And so here we were in our old wobbly rattle-trap, bumping along as best we could over the stony, dusty track of the reserve, to the sound of a cassette-player blasting out at top pitch the latest Kaneka hits of groups like Vamaley, Bwanjep and Guréjélé.

On the way there we stopped a first time on the bridge. Leaning on the jalopy's bonnet, I happened to glance to one side, when I thought I could see some light, or perhaps it was a mere glimmer on the veranda of the ferryman's hut just a few paces upstream from the tuft of bamboo that was now giving me shelter. I asked my nearest brother about it, but he snapped back rather coarsely, 'Listen, little brother, you're either stoned

or seeing spirits, but either way, just cut out this crap, 'cause you're going to scare the others and wreck our night, ok?"

Anyhow, that same hut was now lit up, first by an oil lamp, then by a Coleman and finally by lots of little candles. Then I rather convinced myself that I must have taken a bit too much dope this time which was not my habit, while my brother quickly got everybody to leave the bridge.

One of the rather vague memories I have of our arrival at the fairground is of having to queue up at the entry to the enclosure that was all covered in coconut palms, in order to give 200 francs to the members of the organising committee. By way of receipt they stamped either the back of our hands, our palms or our wrists. The local band was singing Kanaka songs in the vernacular, in other words, singing about the roots, hopes and dignity of a whole people. There was such a throng there that I could barely make out the faint lights of the festive stalls amid all the American army surplus jackets, the parkas, the T-shirts sporting flags of Kanaky, the dreadlocks and rasta hairdos, the dancers carried away by Kanak rhythms and the motionless groups under the spell of the music or simply fascinated by the scene. Much later on in the night, I noticed her, all alone, leaning against the low wall of one of the stalls, her face half-lit by one of the stall's bulbs.

Was it her distant air, her unfathomable gaze, that jasmine flower in her right ear or all of these at once that first grabbed my attention? Was it that presence pregnant with poignant solitude emanating from her whole being that captivated me from the first? Or perhaps I incidentally noticed a luminous aura around her lonely face in that party crowd? Or maybe I was quite simply and instinctively drawn by a certain look on her face that was just as familiar? I couldn't say, but I think it is more the latter. I have surely already met her somewhere, but not in another life in which I don't believe.

No, it is in this life on earth that I've already come across her at least once, in the here and now. After all, our country is only a small island, so it's perfectly possible. Yes, I melted for her, but not as someone unknown or rather not the unknown, but for a face that I had already seen. I did recognise those features and that jasmine flower, I'm absolutely sure of it.

I was to notice her again, strolling around in thongs and mission dress among the crowd, and also standing over by the dimly lit left corner facing the stage, as she moved her head slightly to the rhythm of the music. I made no real effort to go up to her as I told myself that with all the chances we had nowadays for meeting there was no doubt that I would get to know her sooner or later. Although, a moment ago, I used the expression 'I melted', it was not at all a case of love at first sight. I merely beamed before a familiar face that I perhaps infused with mystery, considering the state I was in and the whole atmosphere of the place that night. So I willingly left it to the future to take care of the meeting that would reveal her identity to me, especially as it has never been my style to be the inveterate playboy and even less the unrepentant macho. That night then, I wandered about aimlessly for a good few hours with my brothers and cousins, from one stall to the next, or on the turf of the dance strip, in the walled-up enclosure made of palm fronds. When, late in the night, I went home with other friends, piled into the back of a four-wheel drive, I had already forgotten her.

So, you can imagine my surprise when I saw her there with us at our brief stop down at the bridge junction. About 10 minutes later, on the pretext that, having dozed off to sleep, I had forgotten to get off at a relative's place in the tribe that we had just gone past a kilometre back, I hopped down to

return there on foot. In fact, I had need of a great big breath of fresh air to get my thoughts straight. I wanted to sleep out in the open, to rest under the clump of bamboo shrubs in that place I knew so well, the ferryman's haven of peace. I thought that my friends were joking when, in their usual way of saying goodbye, they used two expressions meaning something like, 'See you two tomorrow!' and 'See you tomorrow, you couple from the bridge!'. I understood their hints and innuendo when, turning around in the direction of the bamboo clump, I discovered her about a metre or so behind me. Good lord! And to think that I was wanting to sleep in peace! So, without further ado, I decided to ask her two things, who she was and what she wanted. Her Christian name was Marie and she too was wanting to go back to the nearby tribe. When I made it plain to her that I really wanted to end the night in peace, she gently replied that she knew that and was going straight to the first house, at the entrance to the village about 200 metres from the bridge. I barely had time to say goodbye to her when she was already off in the moonlight, although I couldn't actually see her turn the corner just before that house.

And here she comes back to me in a dream at dawn offering me this silver ring with the young man whose face is also strangely familiar to me! It's five o'clock by my watch and I'm not at all ready to get up. What's more, apart from Marie and her companion bursting on to the scene, nothing has disturbed me in the ferryman's haven of peace. Ah, that's it, now I've got it! Marie's companion is the ferryman himself, a long, long time ago, during his years in the French army, as he was wearing the navy blue cap of the military. What a fine-looking couple they were before fleeing the dawn, and such a vibrant presence that you could virtually reach out and

feel it! I would very much like to fall into such a deep sleep again to see them and meet up with them once more.

I met the ferryman for the first time one afternoon during an information tour with some friends from the independence movement, nearly 15 years ago now. We had left him a few leaflets on the topic of '24th September = Kanak mourning',¹⁹⁰ and he had offered us the hospitality of his hut for the evening when we got back from the neighbouring tribes. After a meal of yams, taros and fish, we had a long discussion in the flickering light of an old oil lamp. We smoked one Benson and Hedges after the other, while he very carefully cut his black tobacco with an old-fashioned pen-knife before rolling it with aplomb in Job paper. He kindly encouraged us in a clear and measured voice, taking his time to choose his words carefully. He spoke to us about his experience as a volunteer in the French army, first of all in World War II, then during the War in Indo-China. It was the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu¹⁹¹ that finally opened his eyes to the real role of a colonial army. The heroism of the Viet-minh fighters convinced him once and for all of the legitimacy of their struggle and the justice of their cause, and as soon as he got back home he left the army.

Near my companions snoring on a large mat spread out on the cracked concrete ground, the two of us again talked long into the night, he on his bed of rusty, creaking springs, and me on a narrow folding one opposite. That's how I came to learn that he had marched down the Champs-Élysées as a member of the Pacific Battalion behind Tom Hagen,¹⁹² that the cliffs of Hienghène reminded him of those at the Bay of Along, that the river mouth where he would ferry people across on the pontoon reminded him at times of the Red River

over there in Tonkin. The silence of the night was sliced by the sounds of horns as he won me over for ever, while a relative replaced him on the barge. A little later on that night, a smiling face came repeatedly and excitedly up to me in my sleep. It was that of a young woman, dressed in a Vietnamese tunic and pants and wearing a jasmine flower in her right ear. Her face was religiously preserved along with his other shrivelled photos that were relics of that part of his life to which he was bearing witness in front of me. I was often to return to the ferryman's place, he who to this day will remain¹⁹³ the elder with the most to say to me.

He would conjure up for me on the barge the gruesome discovery he made, one morning after the flood, of the body of a relative marooned by the receding high water, or the drowning of a hapless young man who wanted to brave the current in bad weather. He would tell me about the comic domestic scene in which a husband, sick and tired of hearing the recriminations of his good lady, quite simply threw her overboard and had to swim with all his might to bring her back up to the surface. As he tried to do so, she yelled at him before letting herself go under:

'Since you want to drown me, so be it. That way you'll be rid of me so you can go and screw around wherever you please!'

One afternoon, he had to dredge up a car that had plunged in and sunk to the bottom due to faulty breaks and whose driver got out just in the nick of time. On another occasion, it was some tipsy joker who wanted to show off in front of his friends by doing handstands, somersaults and pirouettes until he fell in, swallowed a mouth-full and got the fright of his life, as the queer fish couldn't swim.

On his bamboo raft, the ferryman would go through the names of all the different species of fish, shells and other marine life, as well as the mangroves, rushes, algae and various

other aquatic plants that he knew about. Later on, in the canoe he used for fishing, he would show me some tricks of the trade that helped to entice and snare the fish in the net or on the end of a spear. So it was that he would teach me how things are done by today's methods using a long reed, a thin piece of wire and tips sharpened by filing. Often when we brushed past the mangrove swamp we would surprise a kingfisher on the prey, before nabbing the big crabs in season. He would talk to me about fishing for trochus shells with the Japanese and memorable times snorkelling without a face-mask just off the little islets or out on the reef. Knowing how to interpret the flights of birds to find out about the weather conditions was second nature to him. When we went out rowing together, I learned a store of things, both small and big, from the ferryman who sat on a wooden box, checking or repairing his net, sharpening his spear or preparing his hook. He would tell me the names of all the varieties of pine and coconut trees, the signs of where people had been or settlements established in the area, as well as the names of the hillocks and the rocks either jutting out into the water, further out in the lagoon towards the sea or up in the distant hills. In that way, as time went by, I was to discover through him whole chunks of the history, stories and legends of that great valley.

In his fields higher up, he would give me the names of all the edible, medicinal and other plants that he could. Above all, he would initiate me into the art of preparing the earth for the gestation of yams, then the way of nurturing their growth to maturity. He would classify the yams according to their category, both by name and by pointing them out to me on the ridge itself. As he did so, he would¹⁹⁴ also paint a picture for me of the people from yesteryear, as we call them, the elders who taught those of his generation about the rites and labours of the land, the sea, the hut and men. He let me know¹⁹⁵ that

he had reeled in his first fish well before knowing how to plant a yam.

At afternoon nap time, he would also tell me the story of the vestiges of the past that appear here and there on the river banks. The old barge abandoned by the American army was still lying in its spot there and, depending on the tide, it gave shelter to a school of fry, a joust of young crabs or some race between different aquatic creatures. Oysters had almost totally taken over its rusty surface and it was not unusual to see women prising them off with a machete or large kitchen knife.

Closer to the sea and yet still resisting the relentless onslaught of the waves was the concrete remains of the old pier, the embarkation point for the *Tour de Côte* service,¹⁹⁶ as well as for trochus shell fishing and for going off to war. It had often been the last bit of land trodden by those who embarked on a long journey that might be their final one. On the opposite bank was the sacred and impenetrable grove of pine and coconut trees that had been home to the chief's fishing huts handed over in former times to the colonial authorities by relatives jealous of his prestige and reputation. They had also snatched his axe to kill a settler and then secretly put it back in his hut as a blood-stained piece of evidence they then showed to the police. Exiled to Obock, the chief told his brothers to remember him each time they greeted Kaatâdaa, the morning star.

The rusty corrugated iron roof upstream on the other side between the top of the erythrina bushes and the dragon-blood foliage was that of the old coffee factory with its many floor-tiles for drying the little red berries. He gorged himself on them whenever the relatives who worked there took him with them. He had great fun separating the dead leaves of the coffee plants and inhaling their moist emanation as he collected the dry seeds. He sometimes felt slipping through his fingers the

black and ringed centipede with the ladybird smell that left a pinkish colouring on the palm of his hand. The intoxicating scent of the coffee plants in bloom or the delicious aroma of ground coffee wafted far up both sides of the valley, carried by the trade winds and land breezes alike.

One of his most radiant childhood memories was that of a couple of Indonesian market gardeners whom he talked to me about with such a fervour that it seemed to attest to their continued presence in the area. Thanks to them he discovered the smell of spices, the burnt aroma of chilli, the velvet texture of curry, the wonders of clove and the heady odour of Indonesian tobacco. But, above all, he discovered the multi-coloured rice cakes that you could munch on forever and the rissoles made of flower and eggs whose sweetness he claimed still to be able to taste in his mouth.

They often took him with them when they went to Ramadan gatherings with their fellow countrymen at a nearby cattle station. He looked dapper in his grey suit and black forage cap holding the Koran in his right hand. She had a sarong over her finely moulded figure with a silky corsage around the waist. Her jet-black hair was cropped into a bun, complete with pin inside a net at the base of her neck, and she wore golden sandals on her feet. When her mother dressed her up, all the relatives knew that it was to go 'to the Javanese'¹⁹⁷ prayers and celebrations'.

In the evening, he would sometimes recall one of his grandmothers, her hair all wizened, who was an expert in the art of taking him into the marvellous maze of legends from which it was often hard for him to return and which went on into the enchanted forest of dreams and the magical world of childhood.

The ferryman would also confide in me that he was happy to be the last in his line of work in that place which, according to the elders, was also the path taken by the dead on their way to their country under the waters from where you could occasionally still hear, as Kaatâdaa passed overhead, the crowing of the cocks welcoming a newcomer. Likewise, he would acknowledge being happy with the future construction of the present bridge for us and for those who will¹⁹⁸ come after. The ferryman was to tell me so many other things besides. I loved to hear his voice, which was sometimes shaken by a fit of coughing, merge with the surf pounding against the raft, the lapping of the tide in the mangroves, the cicadas chirping at dusk and the sea murmuring in the depths of the night.

I was now wide awake and turning over in my hand that silver ring with two names engraved followed by ‘Saigon 1954’, which I had just found there under the dry bamboo leaves. But the ferryman never told me the story of the young woman with the jasmine flower. I was to learn much later, and only by hearsay, that in the early 1960s they had found a car near the barge. It was an ordinary grey Citroen 2CV,¹⁹⁹ without any passenger, papers or anything else on board. The police investigating the matter then went on the trail of a Vietnamese woman in her thirties suffering from leukemia who was being sought by her parents about to return to their homeland. The ferryman was said to have declared to them and others that he hadn’t heard the car coming and was surprised by the sight of it at daybreak.

Today, the ferryman is no longer with us, but neither I nor anyone else have ever found out how he disappeared.

Encounters

I was 10 years old and it was the first time that I was coming into the tribal village. The bus on that Friday 13th October, which had been delayed on account of a breakdown, had dropped me off on the side of the territorial road from where I had to go along a track to get to my maternal uncles' place. After a final wave to the female relative who, knowing the area, had stopped the coach and pointed me in the direction of the right path, I started off without wasting any time. The afternoon was drawing to a close and I wanted to reach my destination before nightfall.

Avoiding the tips of the spiky plants that I certainly didn't want to brush against, I first hurried down a small slope towards a stream that flowed between the moss and the ferns of the undergrowth sheltered by forest trees. The cawing of a crow revealing my presence outdid the chirping of the perchers in the foliage, while a green turtle-dove, surprised by my intrusion, took flight from the black rock where it had been shaking its wet beak. As I crossed the creek I could detect the smell of tobacco and, noticing some footprints on the rocks, heard someone chopping wood upstream.

Scaling a slope on the other side that was not quite as steep, I had fun picking the tiny blueish-purple bunches of flowers of the *doobiti*²⁰⁰ plant, which were hanging all down the sides of the track beneath thick tufts of straw, collapsing under

the weight of their downy flowering. I then emerged on to a sort of platform where, to my right, there stretched out a coffee plantation that instantly seemed very lively to me. Indeed, I heard women merrily laughing there, just like my mother with her cousins or friends in their fields on the hillsides up our way. Then peels of laughter and shouts of children, the sounds of lullabies like the ones that my mother used to sing to me and nursery rhymes that I had learnt at school all rang out noisily as if to lend a note of jollity to that beautiful late afternoon. In turn, I began to softly sing the songs of welcome as I entered the undergrowth in front of a niaouli tree hill, where, a few steps further on, I could clearly hear at my back the sound of sobbing that shattered the children's chorus coming from the coffee field.

I was intrigued by the melancholy cooing of a turtle-dove that I tried to spot, and stood in rapture before the smooth emerald green of fern fronds divided down the middle by a black line, where the *u*²⁰¹ ladies were nestling. Astride the fork of an old tree that was also sporting a few native orchids, they offered up their great, green corolla in natural pose to my dazzled gaze that until now had seen such ferns only in a puny and somewhat stunted form, planted plum in the middle of a tyre put there for the purpose on the grass or at the bottom of someone's garden in town. Higher up, I was enchanted by small violet and white bell-flowers rising straight up from the ground between the beige-coloured hoops of mountain mangrove roots near a young palm tree that lay before me, its foliage folded in the form of giant fans. For a minute or so, I stopped to admire the diamond-shaped pale pink buds of the mangrove tree about to blossom.

At the skirt of the small forest, as I was joyfully inhaling the heady scent of some taboo wood flowers that I picked from between the yellowish leaves and the soft velvety

moss, the limpid sound of an axe hacking vigorously away at a solid tree trunk clearly reached me from over by the creek, upstream from the ford I had just crossed.

I climbed slowly up the niaouli hill lined with a rose-pink carpet that grew darker or lighter according to the direction of the sun, under the flowering of the wild para grass whose oily smell mingled with the fruity scent of the red and white flowers of the clumps of *kari*.²⁰² Clusters of the pinkish violet orchid of the savannah were spread through the niaouli trees. And beneath these clusters were yet others showing the red, yellow, orange and purple tints of a young lantana bush in bloom. The small blue fruit of the *mâbi*²⁰³ made a stark contrast with the exceptional greenness of its leaves, while the *pâbê*²⁰⁴ was bowing under the feathered weight of a black-eyed and white-haloed percher with a gosling-green down that was pecking away at its pollen seeds. Blackbirds with yellow beaks and feet were hopping about on the branch of a niaouli tree covered in that nondescript ochre vine whose stems, so my mother said, would catch the knives of the deities.

At the top of the hill a sweeping view of the tribal village presented itself to the 10-year-old girl that I was. My gaze was enraptured by the vast blue mantle of the sea framed by distant headlands, where twin atolls were merrily prancing. Awestruck, I sat down for a minute to catch my breath on the rounded portion of a black rock jutting out between the sharp tufts of grass where a few surprised or frightened insects were hiding camouflaged.

I took in the sight before me as completely as I could, to lock it away in my mind for later and for a long time to come. I was brought back once more to reality by the cawing of a crow a little further down indicating my presence, and cheerfully set out again on the track that cut a diagonal path down the hill.

I quickly came upon a little creek where a perfectly translucent stream of water was running gently by. Crouching on a rock to have a drink and wash my face, I lifted up my head to admire, downstream, the red and white bell-flowers of the *ipua* tree²⁰⁵ that shed some light on the semi-obscurity of the undergrowth. Further up on a bank, a hedge of tall plants with big, yellow, daisy-like flowers lit up the skirt of the small wood. On a heap of vines below, a white-ringed pigeon was gorging itself on fruit from the violet convolvulus creepers, whose leaves and vines my mother would sometimes use to rub herself with when she was sick. Bees were gathering honey from the fragrant flowers of a native cordyline bush in the thick of a spray of passion-fruit flowers in bloom, wild morning glories and other similar climbers.

I went along what had once been a yam patch, completely replanted with wild peas,²⁰⁶ whose green or brown-streaked pods were swelling out to bursting point. I thought I had detected a feminine presence busy picking the coffee beans, but it was only a sultan chicken roaming about under a clump of sugar cane overhanging a broad ditch, and it scampered away in its black gown with glints of blue, its red crest in the air as it went. Puzzled by this sudden flash of a furtive shadow that might be busy nearby, I ventured a glance at the other side of the ditch between the scanty green and piebald stems of the wild pea plants, only to discover another deserted yam patch exposing the earth shod of its round bumps in the pastel tones of the closing day.

I stopped in front of an old aloe plant along whose outrageously lacerated leaves the various inscribed dates, coded messages and signatures would excite the curiosity of passers-by. I was intrigued myself and went closer to try to decipher that ostentatious writing, but couldn't really decode either the Roman numerals or the different names and nicknames

abbreviated as bare consonants. Nor could I understand why the two figures in Arabic script telling the year were written back to front, so that it read as 49 rather than 94, 59 instead of 95 and 69 in place of 96. Putting it down to the complications or mysteries of grown-ups, I gave up the ghost before picking up a little sharp pebble with which to scribble clumsily my own first name.

Just then I was surprised by an old man who could be²⁰⁷ my grandfather and whom I had neither seen nor heard coming. He addressed me in our language that I could understand but not speak: ‘Ah, so you’ve arrived, young girl! Well then, you’ll find your grandmother down below in the house. Go on, she’ll show you the way, as I’m heading off in the other direction!’ I had scarcely replied ‘yes’ before he was already walking away, leaving in his wake the same odour of tobacco that I had earlier smelled at the small creek.

I crossed over a third stream where I distinctly heard someone treading water but, as I didn’t meet anyone, I thought that it might have been a big eel that I’d frightened. For a short while I went along the watercourse which wound its way between the mossy stones, its crystal clear sound replying to the joyous trills of the perching birds singing here and there in the harbour. Their melody seemed to me to muffle another one, which was possibly being sung by a Kanak religious chorus that I situated in my mind downstream. A tree offered its long bunches of creamy flowers between the tamanu trees²⁰⁸ showing their pink bouquets and the *wââbé*²⁰⁹ that lavishly spread their white stars, the scent of which added to the magic of the place. Down the sides of the track ran Suzanne vines with their yellow petals and crimson eyes. I picked one flower to smell and admire it from close up for a few seconds, before gazing ahead again, just the time it took to be amazed that I was already out of the undergrowth — and then I saw her.

There she was waiting for me where the path veered to the right, leaning against a little embankment from which young tufts of grass, straw and ferns were jutting out. On her left, a track led up between two rows of red hibiscus bushes towards a cluster of pine and coconut trees shading a rectangular hut with white walls. Other traditional plants were growing alongside the hibiscus shrubs, such as the green or pink cordyline bush, the croton with little dark-green leaves on one side and mauve on the other, or again what in our language we used to call the ‘*bagayous*’²¹⁰ of the ancestors, cats’ brush tails or vanilla plant stakes. The large bright-yellow flowers of a vine with milky sap and two stars with eight coloured triangles on the whitewashed walls brightened up either side of the entrance to the house. Another hedge perpendicular to those of the entrance concealed the yard, but, just as before in the coffee field, I could still see a great deal of human activity going on there. A celebration was being held, with the *tapéras*²¹¹ drowning out the beating of the bamboos and the rhythms, cries and *ae*²¹² of the *pilou*.²¹³

She had been looking out for my arrival and smiled as she came over and gave me a kiss, gently running her fingers through my hair and whispering with feeling: ‘*Auu!*’²¹⁴ *Jênôôrî kôô!*’²¹⁵ There you are, my little one! *Auu!* There you are my dear little mother! Come, I was waiting for you to show you the path leading to your maternal uncles.’ I inhaled her smell of burnt wood, but I found her hands and her cheeks a little cold. I surmised that she had no doubt just got out of a bath there in the creek, as the drops of water were shining like beads in her white hair that barely covered a bamboo comb also dripping wet. While she was explaining in a few words the meaning of the celebration going on over our heads, she quickly took me out on to the track from where, some 200 metres further along, at another bend, could be seen the

pointed tops of the three araucaria pines at my uncles' place. Then, with a whisper of 'See you tomorrow, granddaughter dear', and 'Hurry along, it's already dusk', she left me there, smartly turning back in her old mission dress on which big pale-yellow fish stained with banana sap were swimming against a faded blue background. My aunt, the older sister of my father who was married to the eldest of my maternal uncles, and at whose home I was to spend the weekend, seemed somewhat puzzled when, on my arrival, I told her who had shown me the way to their place.

On the Sunday morning, when she showed me some photos of her relatives, in fact my maternal grandparents, that had been taken some time before they died a good 20 years before, I easily recognised the grandfather and grandmother who had spoken to me on my way there. My parents in town had some photos of them too, but from what I would call their youth. So for me there was no connection between those photos and the present ones, especially as I had never actually seen my grandparents alive, being born long after they had both died. On the mountain path, I had quite simply taken them for a grandfather and grandmother like any other, as we all have so many of them here in our culture. I had taken them for what in fact they were — or more exactly for what they are.

In the afternoon, as she walked me back along the path, my aunt told me that the hillock where the *pilou* had taken place had actually been the spot where my grandparents had had their last house and where she herself had, as a little girl, danced in the adobe mud and helped the elders out in putting the lime on the walls and seen the young men colour in the triangles of the stars. One Friday 13th October, she will²¹⁶ always remember it, late in the afternoon just before sunset, she had found her lifeless mother in front of the embankment at the entrance to her place, lying in the blue

dress she wore for working in the fields, the one with the big yellow fish. Her old bamboo comb stuck in her wizened hair still wet from the dip that she had just taken in the creek. The mound on which stood the rectangular hut with limestone walls and painted stars had been abandoned once and for all or rather returned to nature after the *pilou* and celebration that marked the end of the period of mourning. Her final yam patch had been the one where I had come unexpectedly upon the sultan chicken. As for my grandfather, he had died some time before her ‘on the other side’²¹⁷ of the mountain, in the coffee field where I had heard the lullabies and the nursery rhymes. That was also a Friday afternoon when, over-exerting himself at the height of the hot season, he had come to pick the coffee beans. That was after cutting down some trees at the edge of the creek running alongside the territorial road, there where I had smelled the fragrance of tobacco.

At my grandparents’ place up on the hill, nothing remained but the pines and the coconut trees. A few charred shrubs were all that survived of the coffee plantation. A week before to the day, a fire had started somewhere about there — where exactly was never known — and both sides of the mountain had been completely devastated. My aunt didn’t stop grieving over it all the way along the path.

In the bus taking me back to town, I again heard the clear voice of my grandmother in her faded blue dress with the big yellow fish, explaining to me in our language the meaning of that celebration up on the mound. ‘That dance closed the period of my mourning,’ she told me.

(Ab)using Time

The weather is close, incredibly close. And now I can hear Tikakara²¹⁸ waking up somewhere over by the mountain. The muted sound of thunder can also still be heard rumbling away, but it is really too hot for that to be all there is. The sky has become a white blanket with clouds full of water. My grandmother, who has a field nearby, has just filled her bag with taros and is now collecting her machete, as she is coming back home. And down below by the reef I can see my protégé, the young fisherman, scurrying along all alone with his net and catch. He is heading towards the hole where a couple of little blue fish are nestled in order to release some of the small fry, as is his wont, to let them have a moment or two to live. He has been my closest neighbour, if I can use such a term, for some while now, ever since he built his hut on this land reclaimed by his people. I also live there, near the track we take when we go up into the mountains with the war stone.

For the time being, his brothers are not building next to him. They are being led astray by the eldest one who, with one foot in a sect of the *popwaalé* and the other in his own self-interested pursuits, spends his time making them afraid of me. He tells them a lot of nonsense about a so-called curse hanging over our lands. In fact, he is out to grab all the land for himself with the aim of putting up a fabulous four-star hotel complex complete with golf course, marina, hobby-cat, jet ski and other

such tourist follies that in fact fool or suit no one but himself. Others have their own artificial paradise in the form of grass that they smoke between two requests for money they call 'cash advances' they make especially of their relatives, male and female, who are on a salary or in receipt of a pension. They also get involved in petty crime, like breaking and entering, mostly the houses of well-off civil servants,²¹⁹ which sometimes lands them a life sentence, either jail or drugs and welfare. As brothers first and last, they drop in on the young fisherman's place, but leave him out of their capers. They know full well that he wouldn't join in anyway.

Like other kindred spirits, he'd rather try to find a way out of this prison that keeps on bringing his people down to the level of junkies and other no-hopers. So he never misses a meeting on all they're doing collectively about this. They are really trying hard and sometimes have to feel their way, but they always manage to go forward, which is something that does not thrill those who take a wicked pleasure in wronging them. What upsets him the most are the stupid, nasty rumours that many readily take at face value and pass on just as easily. We recently had a long day of meetings assessing our progress and went over many such rumours with a fine-tooth comb in order to find out who was at the bottom of it all. At night, when I was coming back with him from the meetings, I showed him in a dream some dwarfs who seemed to be listening to a schoolmaster in what used to be houses that had become even more dilapidated. This made him say, 'But that's why we couldn't see them, they were hiding in there!' Although a little puzzled when he awoke, he quickly understood that little sorcerer's apprentices in rumour mongering were involved in trying to stem the tide of history, which meant that they needed to be educated and have their consciousness raised. That is one of my own ways of showing the path of our country to him, the long path of our heritage.

Now that he is moving into the mangrove, I can make out someone else walking slowly along the beach, who is hidden from view by the reeds. It is one of my cousins who, taking advantage of the fact that her husband is away at work for the day and her children are at school, is going to meet up with her lover. He is a married uncle who has stashed his bike away a bit further on, near the coffee field where he has a contract to clear the undergrowth. As he is from a neighbouring tribe, he has never been short of an excuse for their meetings up to now, anything from going fishing or deer hunting to running an errand for so and so, visiting family or consulting a faith-healer. None of these fine excuses bothers his wife for that matter, as she also cheats on him at home as soon as he goes out. Today, like on the other occasions, he will be spending his lunch-time with my cousin in my company, in the shelter of the old taboo wood down here by the waterhole at the end of the creek.

This is where I may be, but without being there at all. It is said that I live and dwell here, that I am the master of the place and such like, but the truth is that I am everywhere and nowhere. For many people, I don't exist, but little does that matter, as for me the question does not even arise. This is one of my favourite spots for many different reasons, including the one connecting me to the solitary, young fisherman. It is from here that I followed him for the first time on a sultry late afternoon when his mother, pregnant with him and sick, came to get a vine to heal herself. She was accompanied by her own mother, who took the vine and rolled it up in her hand, as she sat on that dark, flat rock by the waterhole. After casting a long nostalgic look over the place, she turned away to wipe a tear from her eye, unbeknown to her daughter who was swimming there. Even now, after so many years, the terrible image of that afternoon long ago was still painful for her.

She was a preacher's daughter and only had a month left in our community before leaving with her parents. She had grown up with us and I nearly went crazy at the mere idea of it. As far back as I can recall in our childhood together, she was the only one I had eyes for, and as soon as we became teenagers we moved on to other games, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The minister and my father, the deacon, had decided that this separation was a good opportunity to test us out before marriage. But all that just made me mad with rage. So, that Friday morning, when she proposed that we go together with our parents to a wedding in the neighbouring village, I refused, asking her to stay with me instead. Somewhat taken aback by my refusal, she said simply: 'No, I have to go with them, but we can meet up on Monday at the creek!', before quietly leaving me. I didn't even see her go off as I was swallowing my anger and hanging my head low. Feeling sick at the thought of her smiling to others, I stewed in my jealousy for two days before finding a way of getting my own back. On the Monday, I was waiting for her. I saw her coming, as calm and collected as ever, and then watched her freeze before quickly running away as I was kissing another girl, down there on the dark, flat rock.

From then on, wracked as I was with remorse and shame, I did everything I could to avoid seeing her again before her departure one afternoon by coastal ferry. That day, I had decided to remain alone here at the creek where I was to spend the whole morning desperately following the path of the sun. And then when I heard the sound of the ferry, I ran like crazy towards the tribe's little wharf that was all crammed with people. There, quite out of breath and having swallowed my shame, I said my goodbyes that she received with her calm smile. Then, feeling the urge to talk to her, I waited on the track for one of my aunts who was our go-between and the last to leave the jetty.

She came over to me with a cool, ‘Ever since what you did to her she’s been waiting for you day and night until this morning just to hear a single word, “Sorry”, even if you didn’t want to give her any explanation. She didn’t dare go to see you for fear of being further humiliated. She didn’t show her hurt openly, but I could plainly tell, and so offered to go and see you. But she wanted it to come from you, as you are the one who created this whole thing between you. She said that if you weren’t there by this morning, it’d mean that you’d always just been toying with her, and that the time had come for you to break before she went away, and it was perhaps just as well for her to find it out now. I could really feel that she was suffering even more not knowing why you did that to her. She didn’t sleep a wink all night as she had been hoping against hope right up until this morning. Then, for the first time, I saw her sorrowful face, but I can tell you that she hasn’t shed a single tear in front of me the whole time. And she was absolutely right not to, as you’re not even worth it. She didn’t want to let any of that come out before getting on the ferry, for she thinks that you might have come one last time just to gloat over what you did. I haven’t got a clue myself what you came here for today after all that, here in front of her and everyone, as if nothing had happened. I’m telling you all this in a rush as I don’t want to walk back with you or even talk to you really after all that you’ve done to us. You go on ahead, I’m staying with her a bit. I’m very upset and terribly ashamed.’

So I took off and came back here from where I could still see the ferry slowly going away in the distance. At night fall, I went and slumped down on the dark, flat rock. A few days later, I too would be boarding a boat at the *Quai des Volontaires*²²⁰ bound for the war from which I would never return to haunt these places again, except in that misshapen uniform they put on to scare children and that some people

claim they have run into on the odd occasion in the middle of clammy, rainy days or at dusk. So I never saw her again during my lifetime. Only once did she come to this area, with her daughter who was married to one of my nephews, that afternoon when, holding that vine in her hand, she wept down there on the dark, flat rock. And for me she is there still, since where I am there is no time, even if in speaking and for other reasons I make use of verb tenses, especially the present, or play around with the past, present and future. Now the weather is growing more sultry by the minute and Tikakara's thunder rumbles ever louder. Grandma is cooking her taros, my cousin and her lover have each gone to their separate homes and the young fisherman is putting his wood away to keep it out of the rain. Holding on to a thin vine of wild morning glory, I slide gently down between its violet bells, from the niaouli flower where I doze, to transport myself over to the dark, flat rock where the soon swelling river will carry my canoe away²²¹ in the wake of a coastal ferry.

Benjie, My Brother ...

To my son

My two friends Sam and Benjie have just left. They brought me the small writing pad I had asked for, plus a take-away bag of tucker. Must say that I haven't been very with it of late, just not up to it, been slaving away like crazy, man! As Alpha Blondy²²² sings in *Kalachnikov Love*, I am 'badly decked out', I'm 'no good shakes', I'm 'wanted'.²²³ So they found me looking pooped, and were worried about my gradually wasting away these past few months. Then came Benjie saying: 'Ah! Don't go mucking around, brother, if you're sick, we'll take you straight over to the hospital. Grab your Health card and let's go, huh! Or else, I dunno, if you'd rather be looked after by one of our own, we'll find someone, right! I'm throwing all this in your face, right, just like that, because you know you're starting to give us the creeps looking like death warmed up, hey. And I'm sure not used to seeing you looking like that, man!'

I reassured them as much as I could, saying that the treatment my grandmother was giving me required a really strict diet. This was something of a white lie, as it's been ages since I've been over to her place, and I wouldn't want her to find me in this condition for anything in the world.

Before going off through the pepper trees, Benjie turned round to give me a final wave, calling out, 'See you tomorrow then, brother!' He's not fooled, and he knows that I know it. The first thing he's going to do now will be to go over to my gran's place to check out my story. Then he'll do the rounds of people we know to try to twist their arms to get them to talk. And if I know him, he'll show up again tomorrow, and this time without Sam, to find out more about what I'm secretly up to. What a guy, this Benjie is! Never anything for himself and always everything for others, even in spite of themselves!

He was our class rep already back in early high school, the year I got to know him. We shared the same double bunk in our dormitory, with him on the top, and were together right from that first Sunday night before school went back. As I had been raised alone by my grandmother in Noumea, I found in him the brother I was lacking. And it could be that he felt likewise, as I was to learn a little later that while he was still a kid he had lost his playmate and brother who was a year older than him. Of course, there had been good mates or at least the neighbourhood gang for me, both before and after him, just as for him, before and after me, there had been, and there will always be, his brothers and cousins in the tribe. But without ever saying as much to each other, Benjie and I knew full well that it wasn't the same thing. It just isn't.

The others called us the twins, and even some teachers said we were a duo like Siamese twin brothers. But we weren't on the same wave-length, really. I mean, opposite to what his name would imply, it was Benjie who acted as the older brother. Everyone else, especially me, merely floated in his wake. And I do mean 'floated', in every sense of the word, for Benjie always made us feel that he knew exactly what was worth what and where everyone stood in the scheme of things.

As long as he was there, we didn't have too many worries. Benjie was our class rep, our spokesman.

I still don't know why or how, but he managed to get every one of us to talk at the meetings he chaired. I remember it especially as I was often the one who had to put the various complaints and demands up on the board. It took me such a long time and sometimes I just couldn't go on and had to hand the chalk over to someone else. The others spoke as if they had all the time in the world, and Benjie certainly did his best to get them to try to clarify and develop their ideas and suggestions. While it was the law of silence that reigned with our teachers, with him in charge, our oral tradition just came out naturally, creating an atmosphere in which people in the class spoke spontaneously about it, even with a sense of urgency. We learnt that adults, be they the elders or the school management, had other things on their minds, and that if they consented — with, it must be said, considerable condescension — to listening somewhat inattentively to our grievances or pretending to discuss them with us as the bell was ringing between two classes, in the end they didn't really take it that seriously. But with Benjie things were different, and we all showed up to his meetings, as we didn't want to miss out on our chance to talk with him.

Until then, I had only been on to a reserve for a few weddings or funerals, and once or twice with my grandmother for All Souls' Day or end-of-year festivities. It was through Benjie that I gradually discovered the lie of the land and the call of our roots. Every second weekend we would go to his parents' place up-country, so I got to know his family and all his relatives. I should say 'our' relatives, as we had become so close to each other that his folk completely adopted me. Besides which, given the way kinship works with us, we quickly found that we had a lot of relatives in common.

It was also during the time I was with Benjie's family that I attended some religious meetings and entered places of worship, first a Protestant church and then a Catholic chapel, for celebrations at Easter or for a patron saint. The fact that we young ones would be asked to go one time to the Protestant service and the next to mass doesn't mean that people don't know which church they belong to, quite the opposite. But as our customary way of life is present in everything we do together, whether we receive a *manou* from uncle deacon or from grandfather catechist, we are bound to take part in the common act of thanksgiving. Benjie's parents explained this to us, and, well, I just went along, especially as up to then my grandmother had not overly insisted on my customary and religious education. Nonetheless, she had taught me what she thought to be the most important things, not to steal or lie and always share even the smallest tin of sardines, as she used to say. I had to show respect and above all, but really above all, work well at school to get a job, something she would say over and over again. Often on a Sunday morning, when I scrounged some small change from the edge of the table or the food chest to go and get some bread, I would hear the first peels of the Noumea Cathedral bell. Then, racing down the slope full of mimosas, I would make the five-franc coins jingle in my pocket, to chime in with that distant bell that was now ringing out loudly, while Gran was still snoring away, sleeping off her plonk from the night before on her rusty spring bed between the walls of the worm-eaten planks of our old shack.

Our last year at junior secondary was also one of adolescent trials and tribulations. In the beginning, Benjie's mother often teased us about one of her nieces, who was a playmate of her daughter's and so in the habit of going to their place. When she arrived, Benjie's mum would fling at us things like, 'Well, come on boys, hurry up then, her lady's here, can't

you see!’, and wisecracks of that sort, in keeping with the custom of free-wheeling language some of our relatives indulged in. From our earliest childhood they also let us know whom we could rightfully turn to for advice at the first signs of sensual awakening. Everyone found this perfectly normal, and the biggest braggarts among us, boys and girls combined, quickly became experts in such things. As for me, it could have all stayed as mere harmless banter if our ‘lady’ in question had not had one of Benjie’s sisters deliver a small, ‘admiring’ missive to me one day. I was not shocked, in fact rather flattered at being noticed, without having for a minute encouraged it in the least. So, I let myself be carried along by her ardour, as one thing led to another, from a word being let slip here and there to meetings being arranged. I didn’t spend the Christmas holidays with my grandmother that year, but, sometime in February, she got a message through to Benjie’s parents, ordering me to return to Noumea ahead of the new school year, which was my first in technical college.²²⁴ My first ‘love’ with our ‘lady’ suffered the consequences of that order, which didn’t brook any discussion.

Things were a little, not to say very, different with Benjie, who seemed to me to be quite untouched by such adolescent passions and crises and, at least that was the way I saw it at the time, actually beyond any and every upheaval. Contrary to what happened to the Gauls in Asterix’s village in the comic strip that we sometimes took such delight in, there was no risk that the sky would fall on his head, firmly planted as it was on his shoulders. The truth of the matter, of course, is that I didn’t have a clue about it and still don’t really. He was our class rep whom everyone respected and also my bosom buddy, but he and I never actually spoke about such things. I put him on a pedestal as the others did, but what went on in the rest of his life, well, I just had to guess, and it’s hard to figure out something from nothing with someone like Benjie.

Finally, let's just say that a lot of girls in school rolled their eyes at him, and particularly one in our class called Jeanne, who lapped up his every word at our meetings. Everyone had noticed it, except, of course, Benjie himself, so the class jokers let him know about it with a kind of theme song that they sang at the top of their voices after each of our sessions. It was the notorious little ditty, 'Don't cry, Jeannette, we'll marry you off.' But poor Jeanne only pined away even more than ever. Her girlfriends then pleaded with the pranksters to lay off, as Benjie was still a long way from figuring anything out, remaining quite oblivious to it all. Needless to say, I was very careful not to let slip even the slightest hint, so careful in fact that one fine morning one of the girls came right up to me with, 'Hey there, you, tell me, is your friend blind or what? Can't you open his eyes a bit to see Jeanne, because I'm telling you, sometimes I just don't know what to do, as all she does is talk about him. Sometimes, she doesn't even eat ...' I was quite taken aback by this, as I was not expecting it at all, and there I was, like an idiot, not knowing what to say back. One of the singers who had been egging things on and who had overheard everything got me out of this tight spot with the question, 'But, tell me, are you girls actually here for school or just for love?' To which she bluntly retorted with 'Oh, shut your trap!' This prompted him to ask me with a big smile, 'Hey, how do you say that in Chinese? Well, you've sure got to go easy with her this morning'. Which received 'Ah, you guys are real losers!' as she went off.

The least one can say is that clearly no one was on the same wave-length in all this. Jeanne was suffering the pangs of love for Benjie, who was floating light years away. Then there was this friend who wanted to help him by getting me involved, but, just like her, I couldn't really do anything about it. And then there were other friends for whom everything

ended up as a singsong. What's more, these jokers sang so well that at the usual end-of-year picnic over by the waterfall they really made Jeanne cry. She just couldn't take it any more, faced with the impossible realisation of her schoolgirl's dream just as everyone was about to go their separate ways for the holidays. With Jeanne's friend the guardian angel glaring wildly at me and being clearly prepared to drop me in the brink, I at last dared to get involved and, testing the water, gently proposed to Benjie, who still hadn't cottoned on to what all her tears were about:

'Benjie, I think Jeanne's got some serious problems, so why don't you go and say something to her while I go on ahead with the others.'

He agreed, and the other girl cocked her exterminating angel look at me, not to thank me, far from it, but to let me know with contempt that it was high time that I got a move on. While she scurried away to take the others upstream, one of our practical jokers stretched out under a bush to play dead. Another, for our benefit, cleared his throat and began to recite Rimbaud's poem *Le dormeur du val*. '*C'est un trou de verdure où chante une rivière ...*' He got all the way through before being hurled into the water by the angel who had suddenly become jovial, saying, 'There you go, take that for Arthur Rimbaud', amid our laughter and shouting.

For the next three years we carried on with our secondary studies in Noumea, where it was to take me two goes to get my BEP, while Benjie would drop out in the second-last year of school after already repeating Year 10. Although we weren't at the same school any more or even in the same area, we still saw each other regularly, as we played for the same footy club and I continued to spend the holidays with Benjie's people up-country. I didn't go nearly as often with my grandmother back to our community where I still feel a little

out of place, I mean without any childhood memories, without a memory of it or strong roots there. I did find something of that with Benjie's people whose language I ended up speaking, whereas I understand only a few words and expressions of what should have been and still should be my own tongue. The clan is something I discovered through Benjie, who was much more accustomed than I was to the trials and tribulations of my grandmother in the city. Ever since I was a toddler she had been carting me about to a whole throng of relatives from all over the country. In other words, slums on the fringes of the city have been my lot since I was a kid, and that's what gives me the feeling sometimes of being a bit out of sync with certain friends. Somehow, Benjie was the first to help me in what I call my re-education or, more exactly, my catching up with normality.

If this question of being uprooted then worked its way into me, by the same token I can't say I was exactly beset by it, at least as far as I have any self-insight. But I must say that the inner workings of the unconscious and everything to do with shrinks and the like are not my strong point. I just give up on all that stuff. I also took some comfort from the rather wild behaviour of one of Benjie's cousins, which was her way of reacting to a certain number of other things that were preying on my mind or tormenting my body, like a physical longing, a state of being disconnected from my clan that comes from losing your place in society and being marginalised. It didn't get me down too much, though, as fortunately Benjie was there to show me the pitfalls to be avoided. My fickle nature must have something to do with it too, since, unlike Benjie, I don't really feel the burden of the past, the weight of experience and all that.

Having been dropped by Benjie's cousin who had become fed up with my fleeting appearances during the

holidays, I found myself with the angel who was continuing, as we were, with her secondary studies in Noumea. There then began a sort of reign of freedom for me that was more or less supervised according to the whimsical temperament of the guardian angel herself. Her efforts to get me to do housework, washing-up or cooking were appreciated by my grandmother whenever she came by our shack on weekends. If Gran had got me used to sharing chores since I was a kid, the angel foisted them on me so well that I often hoped for the unexpected arrival of Benjie, if only to restore some balance and be two against two. In class once, when a teacher told us about power relations, the image of the three or four of us in our shack immediately sprang to mind. As the months went by, the angel gradually came to be my conscience through constantly taking control of things, so that in the end, out of moral laziness, I had nothing against it and simply gave in, until that fine morning when her mother came banging at our door. She bellowed among other things that she didn't want to see her daughter with a bum who slept out under the mimosa trees and who had a bar stool for a grandmother. While the cathedral's carillon was ringing out in the distance, Gran responded with great poise and dignity.

'But you mustn't get yourself worked up, Madam, your daughter is going back home with you, because she's the one who wanted to come here with my grandson in the first place. We are the ones who went and sought her hand in the customary way!'

It was obviously not that Sunday scene that was going to discourage the angel, who was as stubborn as they get when she wanted to be. She very soon found other occasions to see me again, at the pictures, in cafes, at the Bernheim library²²⁵ or at meetings organised downtown by the young pro-independence militants, to which we were invited by leaflet or

word-of-mouth, especially by one of Benjie's uncles, who was very active in the movement. In fact, it was due to contact with this uncle that Benjie had gradually given up our footy training sessions and our other little pastimes to go and hand out leaflets, speak at meetings and go on information tours into the villages. He somewhat gave up the usual run of 'selected texts' for high schools to throw himself into the painstaking discovery of works from the Little Maspero Collection,²²⁶ such as *The Damned of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon,²²⁷ *Unity and Struggle* by Amilcar Cabral²²⁸ or *Memories of the Revolutionary War* by Che Guevara.²²⁹

Every month he would take me to fetch the journal *Afrique-Asie* from the tiny drug store in a new shopping complex downtown, which sort of sold it under the counter. He took delight in its editorials by Simon Malley and through various articles found out about the problems of Third World countries, such as the 'Gang of Four' in post-Maoist China, the early years of a united Vietnam, its war against the Khmer Rouge in Kampuchea, Algeria under Chadli Benjedid²³⁰ or in its post-Boumediene²³¹ phase, or again Ayatollah Khomeiny's regime and the Iran-Iraq war.

He showed great patience in painstakingly explaining things to us and sharing what he was seeking. As we younger ones didn't dare go directly up to the leaders of the movement, we asked him what we should understand by expressions such as 'Kanak identity', 'expropriation of lands', 'class struggle', or terms like 'imperialism', 'neo-colonialism', or 'harkis'²³² that most of us were hearing for the first time ever. True, in our defence, we were far too drawn to the many other concerns of our age group to put in the same effort as him. Later on, though, he did manage to get us involved in the movement, and, from sit-in to demo, we found ourselves with him being carted off and beaten up by the cops to the jibes of a lot of our

relatives who treated us to every bird name imaginable. Meanwhile, Benjie sharpened his tongue, learnt the ropes and began to carve out his own little path in the resistance movement.

For my part, I was as set as could be with him and the angel on either side of me. She was one of the rare female students at the time to find her place in our activities, and with her around none of her girl friends dared to say anything offensive about us or the movement in general. At the same time, she had a guilty conscience about her mother, who was just as wild and authoritarian. She refused to have it out in the open with her and even took great care to hide all her activities from her. Once, quite surprised to notice her from some distance off coming to the meeting we were attending, she whispered in my ear before slipping away:

‘Oh, good God, there’s my mother. I’m getting out of here because she’s capable of coming and telling me off, right here in front of everybody! So, see you later then!’

I caught up with her in the evening at the movies, just as the disco number with John Travolta getting his hips into gear Al Pacino-style between two pizzerias in a street in Little Italy burst on to the screen at the start of *Saturday Night Fever*. But what I especially liked doing with her was to run through the dry grass on the hill overlooking the town. We often did this after a meeting or an aborted demo or a round of getting beaten up by the cops. Other times, it was after racing helter-skelter about the streets in our Adidas or old army boots or tearing up slopes at breakneck speed between the mimosas and the aloes.²³³

Then for Benjie and me came the time of military service, which cut me off from her once and for all. On a sunny January morning, we took off from Tontouta Airport for a wintry Fontenay-le-Comte in the Vendée region of France.

There, we quickly made friends with Michel, a Frenchman, and Khaled, an Algerian, with whom we would go on some epic binges and get up to all kinds of tricks. I say ‘we’, meaning in particular myself and the two others, as Benjie, steadfast as ever, kept a cool head and stuck to the straight and narrow, coming to pick me up when I had drunk too much or, a little later, to give me a shake up when I began to indulge in the delights of dope. Michel took us occasionally to his parents’ place in the country and, one spring day, as we were crossing a bridge that straddled a little brook, I noticed a young man lying stretched out among the flowers, with his feet dangling in the water. The poet Rimbaud’s lines, which we had swatted back home in school sprang spontaneously to my lips: ‘It is a green hole where a river sings ... *C’est un trou de verdure où chante une rivière ...*’²³⁴ The other three went on with it and we recited the whole poem in unison before Michel observed: ‘Oh? So you guys learnt it too, did you?’ To which Khaled responded ironically, ‘Ah yeah, mate, French culture goes everywhere, what do you reckon?’

The two of them were our best friends in Fontenay. At the end of every year, we still send greeting cards to Michel and his parents, who later joined a French committee supporting our independence movement. They would regularly send news to the struggle committee in Benjie’s area, which I was also to join. As for Khaled, he went back to Algeria where he met up with his Muslim brothers. Lately, while watching a TV report on the present situation in Algeria, Benjie told me, ‘Ah! Every time we hear about all that’s going on there, I think of Khaled.’ ‘Me too,’ I said back. I’d been doing so even more these past few days when the media hasn’t stopped beating us over the head with news about fundamentalists stepping up their attacks, the arrests of the FIS’s Abassi Madani and Ali Bel Hadj,²³⁵ not to mention the breakdown of democracy with the

tacit approval of the French Government. What's more, here on the table in front of me, the Koran that Khaled gave Benjie at the end of his military service is open at surah 25 on 'The Law'. As I read out verse 43, I think of all that Benjie has given me:

*Have you not seen
The one who mistakes his passion for a deity
So would you be his protector?*

and also verse 44, as I thought of all the lost souls like me:

*Do you think
that most of them have understanding or reason?
They can only be compared to animals,
yet even more lost, far from the straight and narrow.*

It was on certain weekends in Paris with other friends, I mean apart from Michel, Khaled and Benjie, that I started to explore the ins and outs of the city. Everything had, however, begun in the simplest possible way. One Saturday night, after missing the last metro, I was trying to work out on the station map the shortest way home on foot, when I heard someone ask me the time and whether the last train had really gone. Within a couple of seconds I was back out on the street and into a café with that young woman, before strolling back with her to her nearby bed-sit. I didn't leave again until the following evening when I caught a train back to the barracks.

I got into the habit of dropping in quite regularly to her place, where she gradually introduced me to dope and orgies, sometimes with partners who also officiated at the hotspots of Paris like Barbès and the Bois de Boulogne. I led this double life unbeknown to Benjie, who knew only that I had a girlfriend. Whenever he came to Paris, it was first of all to meet up with his Kanak brothers, who were either students or doing a training course, or soldiers or recently demobilised ones, to talk with them about the difficult situation back home. At the

same time, he continued reading Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxembourg, Mao Tse-Tung, Ho Chi Minh, Giap and many others. I often went with him to those meetings before catching up with my girlfriend and losing myself with her in the maze of my other existence. When my military service was over, I knocked around in France for another three years, whereas Benjie went straight back home.

Shortly after my own homecoming, in the middle of a heatwave, I met up with him again in his village. He had got married to one of his cousins from the clan of his maternal uncles, who had regularly corresponded with him during our military service days. They had just had their first child, while he had become one of the leading activists for our cause. Since the previous year a number of things had been getting people worked up all over the place. The High Commissioner had illegally ordered the security police to attack the tribe of Koindé to recover the trucks and machines of the businessman who had been polluting the river. After the incarceration of a few of their comrades following the deaths of two gendarmes, some female militants had chained themselves to the gates of the High Commission for more than 20 hours in the rain, demanding their release. A young man from Voh had been shot at point-blank range by a settler. Demos had taken place about it and also to protest against the plan for a new statute for the country put forward by the latest Overseas Territories Minister.²³⁶ After the Round Table at Nainville-les-Roches²³⁷ recognising 'the legitimacy of the Kanak people, the first occupants of the land' and its 'innate and active right to independence', the French Government had wanted to impose its transitional five-year statute before any self-determination ballot. This flew in the face of the pro-independence movement's proposal to fix the probationary period at less than a year and the independence date at 24th September 1985.²³⁸

A fortnight earlier, the Overseas Territories Minister had made another trip from France, only to be greeted by other demos on the Mainland and on Maré,²³⁹ and our leaders had refused to meet him. Then the tourist hotel chain Amoa had been ransacked and the round-island bicycle race²⁴⁰ stopped by a roadblock at Tibarama,²⁴¹ just as it had been at the Col de la Pirogue²⁴² after the assassination of Pierre Declercq in September '81.²⁴³ In addition, on the 24th September, the independence movement itself had a new format with the creation of a Front with a charter having 'the goal of specifying the objectives of the Kanak People and explaining how and why it is conducting a national liberation struggle to ensure that its rights will prevail' and calling us to action, stipulating that 'it is urgent that Kanak rally round and organise their conquest of freedom'. The front had decided on an active boycott of the territorial elections that were to take place a few days later.²⁴⁴ Benjie was therefore full-on and went from one meeting to the next with other local leaders in the villages. After three years of bumming around as a lost soul in France, 17,000 kilometres away, I arrived back, but even if he hadn't said anything to me I would have followed him wherever he wanted. So, on the appointed day, 18th November,²⁴⁵ we were ready.

Then came the time of the roadblocks, the fires and the clashes across barricades. It was also the time of death, mourning and repression. I ended up in jail along with many others, where my grandmother in tears regularly came to keep my spirits up before going to drown her sorrows in grog on her old mattress in the shack under the mimosa trees. When I got out a few months later, I went back to Benjie's struggle committee from where I had been rounded up by the police. On the other side, they had offered us the Pisani plan,²⁴⁶ which we couldn't give a stuff about because it didn't correspond at all with the type of independence we were demanding.

We carried on our activities in the struggle committees as best we could between the police raids in their 'operation sock-it-to-them', the provocations of the parachutists on 'walk-about', the gun-popping of fascists thinking they were cowboys in a Western and the denunciations of the hob-nobs feeling betrayed. The shadow of the Transal navy planes scorching the top of the araucaria pines and the engine rattle of open Puma choppers where you could see uniforms ready to jump reminded me of scenes from *Apocalypse Now*. But we knew that just as our elders before us had done, we would survive whatever the cost. Some meetings were given over to information sessions on VD and AIDS, related to the troops' grid-like occupation of the country.

I was hardly thinking of such risks, though, those nights I spent with the cousin were even more exhausting than before. After dropping me before, she was now on with me again behind the back of her husband and children. As for the angel, who had also become a very active militant for the cause, I saw her again many times at our national meetings. But, like Benjie, she's the kind who doesn't go back over the past. The movement's return to institutional life was confirmed with the signing of the Matignon Accords,²⁴⁷ after the massacre on Ouvea²⁴⁸ where, a year later, our tragedy was made complete.

Following in the shadow of Benjie, I experienced these long years of struggle both as a time of redemption and a moment of grace, if someone who hasn't set foot in a church for ages can put it that way. After the demobilisation that brought about the gradual disappearance of the struggle committees, I didn't have the heart to bother Benjie with my questions and doubts about the movement. I didn't want to bother him with such things, as he continued to give so much of himself to others. So, I quietly withdrew and fell back into alcohol, dope and the whole damn hell lot with the buddies in lean-tos. It so happened sometimes

that I found myself hanging around the Latin Quarter²⁴⁹ with some of them or playing the lover boy with some older female tourists in search of a bit of exoticism. But, for some time now, I haven't been into any of that, retreating all by myself behind four planks of wood nailed together in our out-of-the-way spot well hidden by the pepper trees. In fact, I'd actually been wanting to withdraw into myself ever since that vampire bitch started devouring me. But there's no salvation for me.

To Benjie, who ended up locating me — but he'd have found me again even if he'd had to go to the end of the earth — and whom I won't see again, I leave these three poems by the Senegalese poet Malik Fall,²⁵⁰ from the *Black African Anthology* he gave me after reading them aloud by the light of a Coleman lamp at his place one night during the 'troubled' years.²⁵¹ The first concerns my *Intentions* about my immediate future, the second, *Tomorrow*, is for his son and the third is a memento of our early years together as *Schoolkids*.

Intentions

*I will build a shack
[...]
I will raze all the huts to the ground
Around
The tombs the fetishes the canary grass
And the rice
I will install Radio-Luxembourg
On my straw pole
Beside the good-luck charm
And I will say to you
My dear Sir
Take your place
In the deranged kingdom
Of village idiots*

Tomorrow

My son I am no longer seething with hatred
The time for that is well and truly gone
I no longer crush the victor
Crushed by his own victory
He will never sleep on his weapons
That ransacked my horizons

My son the taste of hatred
Has been dissolved in my veins
You will not have known
The footpaths
For Whites only
[...]
My son you will have no hatred in your heart
'So what then, what then, my father?'
'You will have a clear head
And a strong back.'

Schoolkids

I would go to school barefoot but my mind rich
Tales and legends buzzing
About one's ears in the sonorous air
My books and the amulets knocking against each other
In my bag inside my rich head

I would go to school floating on my dreams
In the timeless wake of the totems
I would clumsily take my place
And sneer at what the Teacher said

*You go to school gloved in good will
Open in mind and light of heart
Ready to suffer every humiliation*

*You go to school in the company of Homer
Eluard's verse or tales by Perrault*

Don't forget Kotje at the edge of the sanctuary.

Finally, I will add verse 40 from the 25th surah on 'The Law' from Khaled's holy book in the white El Djezaïr that is being blemished once more:

*They went to the city
On which a fatal rain was falling.
Can't they see it?
But they have no hope of any resurrection.*

Ah! Benjie, my brother!

One way of asking forgiveness of you, for not having been up to it as the saying goes, is here in our poor little old exercise book that you'll find tomorrow by my side when you come to fetch me for the last time ...

Forgive me and farewell ...

Ah! Benjie, my brother! After so much pain and sorrow and struggle, so much silence, and yet with so much hope ... this is one way of telling you what I can't bring myself to say in front of you — I have AIDS.²⁵²

Lida's Diary

for Cau Parainô

The joke went off saucy and searing from behind the hut on that crisp, sunny morning during the time of the 'troubles'. It was aimed at Lida's companion, Miko, who had gone to fetch the activist while she waited for them on the raft that crossed a creek at that spot and bore the same name as the stream, the residence and the old master of the place who was putting up the newcomer. The latter, lithe and nimble, appeared next to his friend, dressed in a white T-shirt with the words 'Kanak Independence' written in black letters across his chest. His faded blue jeans came down over his Adidas shoes covering white tennis socks, and on his head he wore a green cap with the Kanaky flag in a tiny rectangle at the front. Forgetting the small red dragonfly that piqued her curiosity as it squatted on the stem of a plant in the creek, Lida watched them coming, roaring with laughter together as thick as thieves. Kim was the name he gave as he greeted her with an embrace, grinning all the while as his eyes sparkled mischievously. He then took a last mouthful of the germinated coconut that he was holding before going down to wash his hands in the creek from where Lida had seen the red dragonfly take off. She wondered whether Kim was his real first name, his everyday name or a nickname.²⁵³

She asked about his trip and he gave a ball-by-ball description from their first steps on to the dirt track where you could still see a few recalcitrant grass tips that the movement of the police trucks had not completely killed. These were the only words that she addressed to him that morning on the path where she was really happy just to be listening to him. He gave them news of their mutual acquaintances, whom he had run into at the most recent meetings of the movement or who were members of his struggle committee. He also told them about the latest decisions of the movement's leadership, as well as those of the French Government and the various positions adopted by the countries in the region on the turn of 'events'. Miko pestered him with questions and Lida took a mental note of the clear and concise answers that he gave them with a smile or between two peels of laughter. Miko also told her about the political positions of every entrance, path and home in the community they were going past. Kim's good humour won over his two friends and they had a laugh at the highly publicised declarations of the puppets and other token Kanaks as well as the stories about those in the tribes who were sheepishly following them. As she went past old coffee fields where on the way to school children, including herself, used to hang their lunch baskets, Lida could not stop herself quietly comparing them with three schoolkids who were decidedly very noisy as they sang old school songs. She didn't want suddenly to appear as crazy as the others in the eyes of the newcomer, bubbly though he was. They carried on merrily like this, exchanging snippets of news and laughing and joking, as they made their way towards the communal house where the officials and committee activists, together with the independence supporters from the various villages, were expecting them.

After the customary ceremony of welcome involving the exchange and sharing of speeches, cloths, cigarettes and

bank notes,²⁵⁴ some activists set up the space for the meeting. One member of the struggle committee first of all introduced Kim, then the agenda for the public meeting,²⁵⁵ the purpose of which was to discuss the implementation of new organisational, economic and educational structures, involving the general mobilisation of people, in line with the movement's directives. Kim, whose special responsibility was for the political education of those who would put these structures into place in the future, then explained his mission, before giving the latest news of the leadership and the other struggle committees. He also talked about the various support committees in France and Australia, the positions of the countries in the region and the French Government's most recent declarations and proposals. Each of his words resonated with Lida, who again felt the optimism of their good humour when they were on the road together. After a final clarification in the local language of the main points on the agenda, a member of the organising committee read out the list of those in charge of the grassroots divisions, village by village, before asking people to follow them in small-group discussions.

Kim and Miko went from one section to another to spell out an objective, clarify a point or remind people of the political context. Seeing them come and go, offering their infectious optimism to all around, Lida observed their brotherly complicity that had come out of the long and now distant hollow years of the struggle in the city, when the very first activists were beginning to get involved.

She was still just as she had always been, and when they met up with her again now it was as if they had said goodbye to each other only the day before. Miko was good-humoured, but the more reserved of the two young men, while Kim was overflowing with a warmth that made him immediately part of the community into which he was being

welcomed. He had the spirit of life, like a will-o'-the-wisp whose laughter and playfulness belied his clear-sightedness and political understanding. Engrossed as she was in her thoughts, Lida barely noticed a couple of perchers hopping from one branch to another on the old mango tree in the shade of which they were holding their discussions. I was sitting next to her with the job of taking notes and tapped her lightly on the arm to ask whether the second point was indeed about the structure of economic development, but she merely murmured with a smile as she closed her left hand, 'I don't know, I haven't been following.'

Then came a buffet lunch where the food was laid out on the veranda of the communal house. People helped themselves and sat wherever they liked under the trees around the yard. Kim and Miko joined Lida and me on one of my aunt's old mats that we had spread out under a jamelon tree. As we were quietly eating our food, we listened closely to their conversation. Miko was explaining to Kim who was who at that public meeting and how the independence movement had been able to set down roots and develop in the region, referring to all the relevant facts and figures. They then went on to other liberation movements such as the ANC in South Africa, the PLO in Palestine and the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua, before returning to the local situation and wondering what would happen in the immediate future. The independence movement was mobilising the general population in the face of the armed settlers and the ferocious repression by the French Government, which had deployed its troops all through the country, both on the ground and in the air. As if he was carefully weighing up every word, Kim said calmly and plainly: 'Militarily, things are not in our favour, which makes it vital for us to get the French State to give way through a political victory here and to increase our diplomatic support internationally.'

Lida, who was suddenly struck by his serious tone, turned away to avert his penetrating gaze that no longer had any glimmer of cheekiness. As she did so, she clumsily knocked over Kim's glass. Miko started to tell her off, but we cut him short, collecting our empty plates, and I proposed to go and get him another glass. Kim declined my offer laughing, adding that he would drink instead the milk from one of the two green coconuts that a kid had just put in front of him. He gave the other to Miko, just as a ripe jamelon fell on to the mat, fruit that Kim said he hadn't tasted for ages.

The group work went on until three o'clock, when those in charge of each section and the minute-takers put up a summary of the main points on the walls of the room before going over them one-by-one for the meeting, first in the local language and then in French. Further questions and discussion followed, until the coffee break at half-past four when the organising committee gave an overview of the proceedings. They then submitted the full set of proposals to the local sections for final approval at five o'clock. After the usual expression of thanks and the final customary exchange of farewells in which one of the elders strongly encouraged the militants, a committee member reminded everybody of the security orders. Then, after a last cup of tea, we drifted off as night fell.

On the way back, the two friends first went over the actions agreed to by the various committees before moving on to the fundamental question of the unity that was needed in these new grassroots structures set up by the movement. They noted with satisfaction that the Kanak people had regained their dignity and could now hold their heads high in a united organisation.²⁵⁶ This was a change from the colonial institutions in which a lot of the indigenous leaders had come to cling to a certain lifestyle over the years, a few crumbs

of power or quite simply a salary as elected representatives by sometimes selling themselves to the highest bidder. Many had now put their past squabbles behind them to go forward together. I expressed my surprise when I heard Miko say of some of our most militant elders that they had formerly been the most scathing critics of the movement when it was starting out, which made Miko and Kim roar with laughter in the night. They were rightly relishing this happy turn-around of events, but also talked about the opposite path taken by some who had been activists early on and who now set themselves up as know-it-alls, urging people, but to no avail, not to become involved in what they called violence. Kim spoke in the same tone that he had used in the afternoon under the jamelon tree regarding the need for a political and diplomatic victory:

‘But what are roadblocks compared with the colonial violence that we’ve been suffering from for over a hundred years? What’s more, I bet that if tomorrow we go back to playing the institutional game, these hob-nobs will be jostling at the door trying to grab cushy jobs. In other places they’re called war profiteers. Here they are token Kanaks and other traitors who have served as a bulwark to the perpetuation of colonialism and the exploitation of our people. We mustn’t forget that a lot of our chiefs and political leaders didn’t baulk at collaborating with the Whites to preserve a few crumbs of power for themselves. That particular history remains to be written, and we’ll have to do it one day for future generations!’²⁵⁷

Lida, who until then had not uttered a word, touched me on the arm as she whispered in our language: ‘Do you hear what he’s saying? He’s right!’

That night, after leaving Kim at his billet’s place, Miko spent a long time telling us about the time they both called the hollow years at the start of the independence movement. There had been barely a dozen or so of them, young activists

who began to raise the issue of land as being integral to independence, and who were carrying on the anti-colonial and anti-exploitation struggle. They had to inform people, raise their awareness, work on the grassroots and organise the movement at the same time as standing up to police repression and the racism, hatred and violence of the champions of white power and their media. They also ran up against the conservatism of the traditional parties. At home, they had to deal with the fears, criticisms and jibes of their own people, particularly those who were either most under the thumb of the bosses or among the most well-off and best provided for. They also struggled against the incomprehension, indifference and resignation of the have-nots who didn't believe in their cause. Few and far between were the elders, male or female for that matter, in town as in the tribal villages, who dared to support them openly at the time. Nonetheless, Miko named the two village elders²⁵⁸ who had put him and his friends up the first time they had come through for an information day. I butted in from time to time to follow-up on a particular point or other, while Lida carefully listened to him in silence, getting up now and then to serve us citronella tea or stoke the fire that was burning in a corner of the kitchen.

She became quite still as soon as Miko began to talk about Kim, recalling the first time he showed up at a meeting in one of the activist's bed-sit. He had come with another member of their group and, all smiles and looking relaxed, took a piece of cloth and a thousand-franc note out of his dungarees and laid them on the table, which, as his companion began to explain, was his way of making a request to join. At this, the oldest member of the group got up to welcome him with thanks. Kim then went round the room greeting everyone before sitting down next to Miko who, just as in the afternoon under the jamelon tree, pointed out to him who was who in that bed-sit.

So, right from that first encounter, they got into the habit of discussing things with each other, in meetings, on tour, during rallies and banned demonstrations and after police bashings.

In fact, they did everything together, including distributing leaflets, stapling and selling the group's paper and collecting wood in preparation for the *bougna*²⁵⁹ sales. They used to go to a little Vietnamese restaurant where they had developed a taste for chow-mien, chop suey and Chinese soup and would try their hand at using chopsticks. They also had their favourite café whose European owner ended up getting to know them and regularly talked politics with them. They stayed either in Miko's studio or at Kim's aunt's place, who right from the start had been one of their strongest and most reliable supporters.

Late in the night, as she was about to go to bed, Lida quietly told me that she was still upset with herself for knocking over the glass during the meal under the jamelon tree. After I put her mind at ease, she asked me to leave the oil lamp out on the kitchen table as she needed to write in her diary.

Lida's diary was a real little book with a thick black cover, on the front of which in the top right-hand corner was inscribed the year, while the back bore the following two verses:

<i>Time of struggle</i>	<i>Is it the time</i>
<i>of waiting</i>	<i>or the place</i>
<i>of hope</i>	<i>that we lack</i>
<i>so much doubting</i>	<i>that drove us</i>
<i>so much fleeing</i>	<i>or the weight of the</i>
<i>in tracks</i>	<i>dead years</i>
<i>of time</i>	<i>of silence</i>
<i>in retreat</i>	<i>and absence?</i>

Other poems came later to fill up what free space there still was on the pages of the first three months after all the jottings about the movement's meetings, the various domestic, agricultural and customary activities or simply the weather. In that way, the poetry seemed to sing of 'Public Meetings' and 'Grassroots Gatherings', 'Motion/Congress' and 'Assessment/Coop', marking out the tempo of life's activities like 'big washing up', 'hut cleaning', 'leaves burning' and 'pot scouring', humming its 'straw cutting', 'hibiscus planting', 'field hoeing', 'slips soaking', dancing the '*pilou* end mourning', 'customary wedding P+C', 'custom aunt M' and 'clan meeting', or bringing out the subtle differences between the 'scorching sun', the 'violent storm', the 'huge rain', the 'fresh wind' and so on.

Tossed in between Lida's notes on her own activities and how the movement was progressing, these lines of verse blossomed there like so many bunches of flowers or welcoming wreaths. Page after page, day by day, they tracked all the things that filled up her life, beginning with that important day of mobilisation in another commune. That night, in a cousin's car taking her and Miko and me back, she took so little part in our discussion, contrary to her usual practice, that if the two of us had been alone I would have asked her whether she was feeling unwell. Imagine, then, my surprise when, after we arrived home very late, she suddenly declared in a wide-awake voice that she was going to light the oil lamp as she still had things to jot down about the day. I was far too sleepy to dare ask her what she was up to.

The poems came one after another for a month, like so many magical incantations against absence and silence, so many sibylline odes to being present even when one wasn't there. But if absence and silence recurred in a kind of leitmotiv of raw suffering, being present while absent was an image that stuck to the retina, a bead of sweat on one's temple or the hint of a complicit smile. Those lines of verse which also sang of

springing from an empty head or a hollowed eye, or originating in a weary flu-ridden body, delirious or adrift on a grey afternoon, thus carried a vivid hope along a dead-end path, the hope of the self-tortured animal who escapes in order to stay alive.

The story²⁶⁰ of the diary actually began the following month when, in what seemed strange to me at the time, Lida stopped taking it to meetings, using a simple notebook instead. But my perplexity was short-lived as I actually found it lighter and more practical for her bag, especially on our long trips on foot or when we had to fall back quickly along mountain tracks after an attack by the security police. This story was presented in the form of a secret correspondence in which a first-person narrator spoke to an anonymous, or at least unnamed 'you'²⁶¹ that the 'I' met regularly, except on those days when something unforeseen happened, in a particular place 'over there', and in the company of his own 'alter ego', and a certain female Lou. It was written with restrained dignity in a clear and delicate handwriting, without any mistake or erasure and with just a few, barely visible, smudges of a rubber.

This diary was composed between dawn and dusk or dusk and dawn, the exact time always being specified at the top of the page. In this way, every day was honoured in letters painstakingly drawn with a blue biro and which invariably ended with a goodbye to the absent addressee 'over there'. Yet, the latter existed in practically every word and even between the lines, a kind of omnipresent double that the narrator bore within her 'like a child'.

A surprising connivance quietly sprang up between the two protagonists right from the word go. They couldn't say where it came from, but it meant that talking to one another in the world, a little like two young children finding out about each other on the way to school, just happened spontaneously, as if they had always known each other. Over time, this had

become a veritable code involving a single word here whispered either in French or their own language, a finger pressed on the back of a hand there, a frown of the eyebrows here or the drawing of a coconut tree there between note-taking at a meeting. But beyond this particular coded language, they kept to the usual pleasantries and only really discussed things when they were in a group setting.

The narrator, who had promised herself from the start not to cry in this story, had at the same time created a kind of bubble in which she could take refuge at any time, alone under her blanket or out in the field or when a cloud passed over a crowd that was gathering for a protest. Yet, at the same time, she amazed herself at the rage that could stir within her. On some early afternoons when she was feeling as if she was not even there, affected by a strange violence, she was able to burst that bubble and turn into a real stone statue in what she called her 'midday sadness' that was sometimes accompanied by frightful headaches. There then followed a period of brutal introspection, a merciless bearing of the soul in which insight and suffering made her aware that she was running into a dead-end. She compared herself in this with a bird flapping desperately about before finally smashing against the windows of a closed room, time after time. Even in her dreams she often saw herself with him in public or being observed by others who called to them, disturbing their discussion and they walked down by a murky sea or went swimming in its troubled waters.

Between hope and despair, struggle and escape, dream and reality, she expressed the space of the world in a mosaic of lights and shadows, of quick glimpses and snippets of sentences here and there and silences snatched on the run, from time. Saying something, even inept or careless or commonplace, skipping from one subject to another, whatever at all, became a way of trying to deal with the unbearable burden of a fleeting

look that could kill like a criminal, or to break through the incredible thickness of a sudden silence that said much more than any words could. Daring to cast a simple and distant glance at him without his knowing it became for her tantamount to transgressing a taboo.

Under the impact of the 'events', the addressee really did speak to her one morning, alone, about the country's worsening political situation and the urgency of certain actions, entrusting her with a consignment of mail and material. But each time he needed to go away, he showed her a face full of reserve, coldness and even indifference that strongly contrasted with his impish, impulsive and whimsical nature. He also excelled at such times in the art of surprising her or of literally striking her dumb with questions that had absolutely nothing to do with the subject at hand, at least not for her. On one important day of mobilisation in another township, for instance, while they had both spent the whole morning with the alter ego preparing themselves for the moment of departure, he comes up to her just to ask her whom she was leaving with. 'Why, with you, of course!' she replied, trying in vain to discover the meaning of such a question at a time like that. Then he left her to go away in a friend's car. She didn't see him again the whole day, although she was to learn the next day that he had left the country during the night with a delegation from the movement.

Another time, very early one morning, she came with the alter ego to get him while he was still in a deep sleep. Woken by the voice of his old host who was hailing them, he shot out from his hut, dishevelled, with puffed eyes but smiling, to tell them that he would catch up with them a little later on at the meeting place. The real life and soul of the party, he did the rounds from one person to the next during the meal, laughing and joking away as she was eating with another friend

in the shade of a dark wood at the far end of the yard, talking about collating the notes they had both taken in their working group. A short while later, he went over to them with the look he had on his bad days, without responding to all that they merrily told him when they invited him in to sit with them. As they knew that he had to go back home for a few weeks, they inquired about his departure, which elicited a cold, 'No more than 10 days left, then I'm buzzing off home.' Then, ignoring the young man, he turned to her alone to ask her whether she had been told about the next planned day of action.

'Why, yes, everyone knows about it, no? Everyone has to be there, that is, if you're not going off home beforehand!' she answered back laughingly to ease the tension that was beginning to weigh on them, while their friend quickly took the empty plates away. When she told him that it was for their notes that she had to catch up with him and have a chat, he gave out a barely audible and terse 'yes', staring coldly into the distance all the while.

Two days prior to his departure, and just to see his reaction, she announced to his face in the presence of another young man that she would be going to a public meeting in another village with the latter. His smile froze and a frown quickly came over him, as he turned away sharply, just for a second, before blithely taking up the conversation again as if nothing had happened. She had seen what she wanted and, as a way of making up to him for it, promised herself to bring him some of her wicker-work when she went to say goodbye to him the next day. In the event, however, she found only the old host who would inform²⁶² her that he had caught the bus out at daybreak.

She thought of giving this silly little boring story in her diary the title of 'the snake that bites its own tail', just to poke fun at herself. But it was during this period of about three weeks

while he was away that she decided to extricate herself from this no-win situation by doing everything she could to avoid him and keep her distance when he got back. For the first time, she cried over her diary and withdrew into the parents' hut without drinking or eating anything until the next day. Yet, she continued to fill pages and pages of her diary, which thus became the place where a story of what wasn't said didn't take place.

In this way, through her words and verse, she recovered some of her former composure. Depending on how the days and nights went, other little poems were to recount her memories, gradually filling up the diary as they did so, like these three.

*Still you will come
in early morn
under the pontoon
to dip your hand
in the water
and on the surface
the little red dragonfly
will take flight again
and with the water
the little red dragonfly
will be off again
skimming along the water
and in absentia
I will remember
our smiles
and silences broken
through fear or shame
to say or read
the silence speaking
the silence sharing
the silence supporting*

*Reduced to nothing
reduced to nothing
my writing
carves
to no avail
and
nothing
and
nothingness
at daybreak
absence
the outline
of your face
is born
and the curve
of your smile is drawn
into a black sun
in the mirror
of my memory*

*If you are an elf
where I act the imp
if you are unruly
and I unruly too
if you are a rebel
I am a turtle-dove
who weeps
where you were
where you are
where you are not
where you are no more
the whole time
you are away
if you are a rebel
I am a turtle-dove
who reminds you
the rebel
on the edge of absence
in the sky of silence*

At the end of the year that Kim spent with us, we held a little party for him just before he was to leave us once and for all. Late in the night, while everyone was singing and dancing, he asked me to tell Lida to bring his parka back from his old host's hut. She went to fetch it without knowing, no more than I did, that he had taken a short-cut to wait for her there. The next day he went off. Nine months later, my big sister Lida died in childbirth with our little Kim whom I have been raising with Miko ever since. Before leaving us, she entrusted me to pass on to her son the diary whose last three words, dated the day after Kim's farewell party, were 'Night of celebration'.

Our little Kim is today an impish 10-year-old with laughing eyes. Last week, while he was showing me a red

dragonfly that he had caught at the edge of the creek under the little bridge where the pontoon once used to be, the serious tone of his voice and look caught me by surprise, for the first time.

Footnotes

- ¹ In Paicî genealogy, Dui and Bai were two brothers, who gave their names to the original founding clans. Through this very designation, therefore, the text opens with reference to the entire history of Melanesian settlement and local foundation narrative. As Isabelle Leblic explains, the Paicî linguistic region is characterised by its matrimonial organisation, which operates as a dualistic system. It divides the patrilineal groups into two intermarrying halves, those of Dui and Bai, with a preference for cross-cousins (children of the mother's brother and the father's sister), so that the Dui are regarded as being the matrilineal cousins of the Bai and vice versa. See Isabelle Leblic, 'Adoptions et transferts d'enfants dans la région de Ponérihouen' in *En Pays Kanak*, eds., Alban Bensa and Isabelle Leblic, pp.49–67. According to Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Dui is one of the two or three founding ancestors who came into being in the form of earthworms. *Kanaké. Mélanésien de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, J-M Tjibaou and Ph. Missotte, pp.6–9.
- ² The niaouli tree (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*/*Malaleuca leucadendren*) is a local variety of eucalyptus, from which a medicinal oil essence is extracted.
- ³ The *manou* is a loin cloth. No special material is required for this.
- ⁴ The French word is *tribu*, a term with a vexed history. As Bronwen Douglas and others have shown, it was a colonial construct that forced a rigid territorial-based definition on various divergent Kanak realities that are at once more complex and fluid. 'Hierarchy and Reciprocity in New Caledonia: An Historical Ethnography', *History and Anthropology*, 7, pp.169–93.

The term *tribu* appeared for the first time as an administrative category in a decree of the French State of 24 December, 1867, in which, following some altercations, the *tribu* was made collectively responsible for the behaviour of its members and consequently served as the basis for constructing the notion of Melanesian property. This was given definitive form by the decree of 22 January, 1868, which proposed to give each *tribu* a proportion of its former territory. This paved the way for the creation of reserves and the segregation of Melanesians. See Isabelle Merle, 'De l'idée de cantonnement à la constitution des réserves. La définition de la propriété indigène', in *En Pays Kanak*, eds., Alban Bensa and Isabelle Leblic, pp.217–34. Déwé Gorodé herself uses the term *tribu* differently in different contexts: for pre-1946 history, it designates the colonial reserves, whereas its post-WWII reference is to a Kanak community or village up-country, or, dare one say, sometimes to 'tribe'. What has come to be known as the 'customary lands' (without the term 'réserve' being completely abandoned, although the post-war reality of the space is different for the pre-1946 'réserves' still subject to the *régime de l'Indigénat*). Finally, Gorodé sometimes uses the term *tribu* to designate, dare one say, 'tribe'.

⁵ *Popwaalé* is the Paicî term for the French and, by extension, for Europeans, 'whites', in general.

⁶ The expropriation of lands and the forced resettlement of entire communities in areas of the island removed from their traditional attachments, referred to above (note 4), was part of the French Administration's plan of containment for Melanesians. It was systematically put into practice during the period of the *Loi de l'Indigénat* (1887–1946). Accordingly, during this time Melanesians were prohibited from unauthorised movement away from the reserves, and were subject to a compulsory 'head tax'. Similarly, each *tribu*, under the responsibility of its chief, had the obligation of providing a certain number of work days of service. The provision of this forced labour was known as the *prestations*.

⁷ The French word is '*parole*', which is the spoken word, but also the term commonly used in New Caledonia to refer to 'tradition' more generally, including the tradition of oral transmission

of culture, history and law. That is, the word used here has the force of both structure and event.

- ⁸ This 'junction of mountain paths' is both topographical and customary, designating the routes of inter-clan marriage which also map the layout and lie of the land, between one side of the mountain and the other, one side of the river and the other. The French word '*là-haut*' ('up there'/'over there') covers both reference to somewhere up in the valley or to the other side of the mountain (from the perspective of being on the shore), that is to say to places that are on a different plane with respect to the speaker. The expression '*de l'autre côté*' ('on the other side') typically designates the space on the other side of the river, but on the same plane.

- ⁹ In Kanak society, it is the grandfather's role to show the traditional path to the grandson.

- ¹⁰ The younger brother carries little weight in Melanesian society. It is therefore perfectly natural that he should be left out of important business here.

- ¹¹ Téâ mostly addresses Dui informally (using the second person '*tu*' form in French), whereas Dui always uses the more courteous and formal form ('*vous*', in French) when addressing his 'big brother'. The translation tries to render this distinction by use of contraction (informal register) or not (formal register).

- ¹² The term 'father' here designates someone who could be the biological father of either one or the other of the two boys. Or again, it might possibly refer to someone who is not their biological father, but who is the man who raised them. This enables them to be designated as 'customary brothers'. It should be pointed out, however, that the term 'biological' can have an ethnocentric prejudice that is not applicable in island Melanesia. See Isabelle Lebic, *op. cit.*

- ¹³ In this kinship system, marriage should proceed between members of the two major clans. The mother's brothers, the 'maternal uncles', are considered to be the most important reference in the life of an individual, being responsible for all matters relating to blood, namely life, marriage, death. To designate this maternal side, Déwé Gorodé uses the term '*utérin*'

as an adjective and sometimes even as a noun, the latter particularly in the plural. This is not everyday usage in French and so carries some stylistic force. However, the term 'utérin' is found in French anthropological texts, even contemporary ones (see for instance Isabelle Leblic, *op. cit.* p.51), in a way that it is not in comparable texts in English. Moreover, the term is even found in a work by a literacy critic, François Bogliolo, in his anthology of New Caledonian literature (*Anthologie de*). Given that the English term 'uterine' has medical resonances that are not relevant here, the translator has preferred to keep the word 'maternal' for 'utérin'. When, as happens on occasion, 'maternal' is substantivised and pluralised, producing 'the maternals', there is undoubtedly a sufficient stylistic effect to mark the fact that we are dealing with a non-Western culture.

¹⁴ The French original does not specify 'over the mountain' or 'across the river'. These are understood in the spatial references determined here by kinship relations.

¹⁵ 'Our second daughter' here refers to Dui's own 'natural' daughter, while 'our daughter ... Utê Mûrûnû' is their customary or classificatory daughter. Téâ is talking about marriages intended for both young women.

¹⁶ This means that she was raised in the same family, but not necessarily literally breast-fed by the same woman. 'Adoption', which cannot be conceived of in the European way, is a very common practice in the Pacific. See, for instance, I. Brady (ed.), *Transaction in Kinship, Adoption and Fosterage in Oceania*.

¹⁷ The private property of 'settlers' was, of course, land expropriated from the indigenous Melanesians, as described above. See, for example, Alain Saussol, *L'Héritage. Essai sur le problème foncier en Nouvelle-Calédonie*; John Connell, *New Caledonia or Kanaky? The Political History of a French Colony*. For discussion of aspects of French State policy in the 19th century, see Isabelle Merle, *Expériences Coloniales. La Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1853–1920*. For consideration of some of the inherent contradictions of this policy, see Merle, 'De l'idée de cantonnement', *op. cit.*

¹⁸ 'Missi' is the diminutive of *missionnaire* ('missionary'), used by Kanak Protestants.

- ¹⁹ The dawa (*Naso unicornis*) is a lagoon fish with a sharp spear-like point. The dawa season extends from July to September and corresponds with the important period for Kanaks of the replanting of yams. See Alben Bense, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie. Un paradis den: la tourmente*.
- ²⁰ The 'elders' (here *les anciens*, in French) are not necessarily only old men. The term may include young men as well, given the trans-generational identifications referred to in note 29 below.
- ²¹ The trochus (*Trochus niloticus*) is a shellfish from which mother-of-pearl bracelets are made.
- ²² 'Diibéré' is a Paicî corruption of the French form 'libéré', used to designate a ticket-of-leave man, an ex-convict whose 'freedom', however, did not allow him to leave New Caledonia. The 'libéré' were 'estreinto à résidence' in the time-honoured phrase, if their sentence was eight years or more, which was the case for the vast majority of the convicts (*transportés*). See Louis-José Barbarcon, *L'Archipel des farçots. L'histoire du bogne de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (1863–1931).
- ²³ Paicî is the linguistic region in the central east coast of New Caledonia, which also stretches across the north-south mountain range, *La Grande Chaîne*, to include a part of the west coast of the island, encompassing the townships of Ponérihouen, Poindimié, Koné, Pouembout and a part of Poya.
- ²⁴ The customary paths link clans through land and marriage. See Alban Bensa and Jean-Claude Rivierre, *Les Chemins de l'Alliance*.
- ²⁵ The 'new practices' referred to are those of Protestantism. The cousins living 'up in the valley' are Catholic, whereas 'those from across the river' have not (yet) converted to Christianity.
- ²⁶ The auracaria pine (*Auracaria columnaris*) is an important tree as it is planted along the central pathway leading to the chief's hut.
- ²⁷ This construction shows the Melanesian tendency to avoid designating a person directly by name in favour of an indirect form of address involving kinship relations. Téa's children are also the customary children of his brother Dui. He refrains from referring to their mother as his wife or, even less, by name. See below, the story *The Cordyline*, for further details.

- ²⁸ This is the one to whom he is now betrothed and whom he will marry. She is from the same tribe or a neighbouring one from the same region. This whole question shows the impact of colonisation, here via Christianity, on Kanak ways of conceiving 'traditional' kinship relations. Out of the three possible candidates selected by Téâ, two are eliminated because of 'religious' considerations, one coming from a tribe that has remained 'pagan' ('kept to the old gods'), the other from a tribe that has adopted the 'wrong' religion (i.e., here Catholic rather than Protestant).
- ²⁹ This makes Utê Mûrûnû the daughter of Téâ and Dui on account of the Melanesian identification of great-grandfather/great-grandmother and great-grandson/great-granddaughter. See, 'Entretien avec Déwé Gorodé. Propos recueillis par Blandine Stefanson', *Le Lithe'reture*, No. 124, May-August, 1998, p.80 (and personal communication from Déwé Gorodé). Hence grandparents (and the siblings thereof), being the sons and daughters of the great-grandparents with whom the great-grandchildren are identified, are, in classificatory terms, the grandchildren's children. The young Utê Mûrûnû here is identified with her older relative of the same name. As the latter is a grandmother of the two (customary) brothers, Téâ and Dui, being a sister of their respective paternal grandfathers, she is their classificatory daughter, as is her younger namesake, the latter also being their 'milk sister', given that she was raised by their mothers or someone close in the tribe.
- ³⁰ This tree (*Pterocypus indius*) is so-called because of the blood-red colour of its sap. The wood is used to make fence pickets. It was the so-called 'Frenchmen's tree' for Kanaks, as it was planted for shade in coffee fields.
- ³¹ *Auu* expresses great emotion, be it joy or suffering. It is also used as a term of insistence when one is making a request. In the subsequent exchange, 'Öö' expresses disapproval, surprise or anger.
- ³² 'Little father' is a classificatory term, which is also being used here somewhat ironically, indeed mockingly, by the elder Utê Mûrûnû.

- ³³ Utê Mûrûnû and Dui address each other in the familiar way (*tu*, in French). Dui can do this because Utê is his 'daughter' (at least his classificatory daughter), while she can do it because he is so much younger than she is. Utê the elder addresses her younger namesake in familiar terms for the same reason, while the younger woman uses the familiar term of address with her grandmother, because the latter, as such, is also her 'daughter'. And, as the story reveals, the two women are close to each other to the point of identification beyond classificatory terminology.
- ³⁴ That is, both himself and his daughter, who has accepted to marry the man designated for her by the elders. As the younger Utê will soon reveal, this designated husband is in fact the father-to-be of the child she is carrying. Dui and his family are thus more conservative in accepting the tradition than are Utê and her line.
- ³⁵ *Jênôôrî* is a term designating someone bearing the same name as oneself, a namesake that is thought of as one's double.
- ³⁶ This is again the designation according to custom, albeit without any irony intended here. Utê is proposing to go against the will of her elders.
- ³⁷ This 'little sister' is the biological daughter of Dui himself, whose designated fiancé is from 'across the river', not from 'over the mountain' where it has been determined that Utê should be married. This means that Utê is in transgression not only of kinship relations, but of spatial configurations and the whole system of 'alliances' governing genealogy and topography. One could say that the text thus sets up a distinction between male (conservative) and female (radical) forms of behaviour and approaches to 'tradition'. On the dangers of ethnocentric (mis)understanding of 'biological' kinship, see Leblic, op. cit.
- ³⁸ *Aé aé* is an expression that is chanted: for example, all through the night until dawn at the end of the period of mourning by all the clans and their guests. See Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Philippe Missotte, *Kanaké. Mélanésien de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, p.75.
- ³⁹ The 'u' are the sprites or 'goddesses' of woods and waterways.
- ⁴⁰ A *buru* is a young taro shoot given to babies to suck on. Interestingly, this term is not mentioned in Jean-Claude Rivierre's *Dictionnaire Paicî-Français*.

- ⁴¹ The *magnagna* is a liana whose bulbous roots formed part of the staple diet of Kanaks. It is not included in Rivierre's *Dictionnaire Païci-Français*.
- ⁴² The *tué* is a wild yam rich in fibre (personal communication from the author). Rivierre (p.311) lists it as a cultivated plant, *Dioscorea pentaphylla*, a member of the Dioscoreaceae or clone family.
- ⁴³ A 'taboo tree' is the local expression for an oil tree (*bois à pétrole* or *bois pétrole* — see Rivierre, p.315 — *Fagraea schlechteri*), which flowers in December and whose scent is like that of jasmine.
- ⁴⁴ 'Little woman' is a term of affection used in addressing a girl.
- ⁴⁵ *Adi* are tiny pearls encrusted in the wings of a *roussettes* (a kind of New Caledonian bat) tied on to the dark stems of a specially chosen fern with very small conches. It is a symbol of the union of clans. The term '*adi*' is usually, albeit badly, translated into French as '*monnaie kanak*', that is Kanak money/currency.
- ⁴⁶ *Kaapo* is the first name of the chief's eldest daughter, in certain northern regions of the New Caledonian mainland.
- ⁴⁷ The *banyan tree* (*Ficus prolixa*) is a very sacred tree as it is the dwelling place of the ancestors and spirits.
- ⁴⁸ The *pilou* is a ceremonial dance, typically lasting through the night, associated with preparation for war, the end of the period of mourning, etc.
- ⁴⁹ *Îî* is an expression of intensity — of admiration, fear or, as here, of sadness.
- ⁵⁰ This is, of course, a reference to Wilhelm II, King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany (1888–1919), and hence to World War I. New Caledonian volunteers and conscripts, including Kanaks, left for Europe in 1917. Such enlisting to fight for France in its war against the Germans is seen here, from a Kanak perspective, as abandonment of the homeland. The same year, 1917, saw an important uprising against French colonial troops on the mainland of New Caledonia.
- ⁵¹ The *hoop* (*Montrozieria cauliflora*) is an important tree, as its wood is used for the central pillar of the chief's hut.
- ⁵² See previous note. The 'great Kanak revolt' of 1878 followed more than a decade in which Kanaks had been removed from

their own localities and put into *encomprents* for the purpose of the development of European agriculture. The revolt was based on the west coast, principally around La Foa, and so did not concern the east coast 'Paici' region. However, the generalisation of such colonial practices of displacing the local population and expropriating their lands brought the east coast into the uprising of 1917.

⁵³ For Kanaks, the pine tree represents man and the coconut tree woman.

⁵⁴ The 'shark's hole' is an expression used for a high tide that can extend more than several kilometres upstream in the river mouth.

⁵⁵ That is to say that she is pregnant.

⁵⁶ The *notou* (*Ducula goliath*) is a large native pigeon of the Columbidae family.

⁵⁷ The expression, 'Volunteers', is in inverted commas, as many of these servicemen were not in fact volunteers at all. Nonetheless, it was common for returning soldiers to keep their kaki uniform for some time after the war, which gave them a certain degree of prestige.

⁵⁸ Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian island of Oahu on 7 December, 1941, the Japanese living in New Caledonia were arrested and interned. They were subsequently deported, with the consequence that there is virtually no trace of that population today on the island. It is an irony that the Japanese are the most important part of the tourism industry in contemporary New Caledonia, which defines itself in its tourist brochures as the 'island closest to paradise', a term supposedly coined by the Japanese themselves.

⁵⁹ Created on the orders of General de Gaulle in 1941, the *Battailen de Volontaire de Pacifique* saw service in North Africa, Italy and France. See 101 note. *L'Intaire de le Nouvelle-Calédonie*, ed. Frédéric Anglerich, pp.29–30.

⁶⁰ That is to say in Europe, not in the Pacific.

⁶¹ That is, the cousin who became her husband before being killed in the war.

⁶² The 'aunt' is Utê's mother-in-law, that is to say the mother of her companion and consequently the grandmother of her son.

- ⁶³ Wééé is a term expressing admiration, surprise or pain.
- ⁶⁴ The years of economic boom (1969–72). This was due to the importance of nickel on the world market at that time. New Caledonia has one of the most important nickel reserves in the world.
- ⁶⁵ Doniambo is the site of the nickel plant of the Socie'té Le Nickel at the northern entry to Noumea.
- ⁶⁶ Pwiaa was the name of Déwé Gorodé's own mother. See her dedication of the work to this effect.
- ⁶⁷ The Vallé du Tir is a poor Kanak suburb of Noumea.
- ⁶⁸ The Faubourg Blanchot is a traditional 'settler's' area of Noumea with a number of wooden colonial houses now being restored.
- ⁶⁹ Sainte-Marie is a largely European suburb of Noumea with some improvised Kanak squats.
- ⁷⁰ Rivière Salée is a 'multicultural' suburb of Noumea, where many urbanised, and to some extent upwardly mobile, Kanaks have settled in houses rather superior to the dilapidated slums and make-shift squats that are still found around the fringes of, and in some cases within, the city.
- ⁷¹ The taro and the yam are not only basic Melanesian foodstuffs, but key symbols in the sexual division of the world. The taro is associated with women and the yam with men.
- ⁷² This use of '*tribu*' no longer designates the pre-war reserve here, but the Kanak community up-country, the 'customary lands'.
- ⁷³ All these insults are translations of ones that are found in Paicî.
- ⁷⁴ As stated above, note 6, the 'head tax' was introduced by the colonial administration in 1887 (decree of 18 July), as part of the *régime de l'Indigénat*, to ensure that Kanaks worked for European interests on the land. It was extended by further decrees of 12 March, 1897, 23 March, 1907, and 27 May, 1917. The laws on forced labour and some other repressive measures were lightened by the decrees of 15 May and 29 September, 1928. The whole system of forced labour, etc., was repealed on 5 April, 1946, and the French State declared all the inhabitants of its Pacific territories citizens of the Republic on 7 May, 1946. See Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Philippe Missotte, *Kanaké. Mélanésien de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, p.19.

- ⁷⁵ The French word ‘*esprits*’ here has a dual meaning, designating both traditional ‘spirits’, ‘gods’, etc., and the Western conception of ‘mind’, ‘wits’. The Western notion is used more metaphorically here than is the Kanak one.
- ⁷⁶ This is a large bed made out of bamboo, straw and matting — rarely a mattress — that could occupy a whole room of a Kanak home. It is, therefore, a ‘group bed’ that can sleep up to 10 people. As it is raised off the ground by several poles, one climbs on to it by gripping crossbars.
- ⁷⁷ A traditional Melanesian feast dish of yams, taros, sweet potatoes, chicken and sometimes fish, which is cooked in an earth oven.
- ⁷⁸ The cost of housing in Noumea is very high. Even a bed-sit is out of reach for many Kanaks.
- ⁷⁹ The period of severe social unrest that divided New Caledonia between pro- and anti-independence factions in the 1980s and which, depending on one’s perspective, lasted until the signing of the Matignon Accords (1988) or the assassination of Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1989).
- ⁸⁰ The ‘struggle committees’ were created in the 1980s by the FLNKS (Kanak National and Socialist Liberation Front) as an organisational unit in its radicalised push for independence. These local bodies were given tactical autonomy in a decentralisation of authority, which was no more than a recognition of power relations on the ground. This presented both the opportunity for a surprise factor in local actions and the risk of things getting out of hand. See Stephen Henningham, *France in the South Pacific* (pp.83, 103)
- ⁸¹ The cordyline is, for Kanaks, a male plant, with a filiform trunk. Its flower smells like honey. It is the sheaf, however, rather than the flower of the cordyline that, symbolising the breath of the departed person, is delivered to the maternal relatives. The paternal clan takes it to the uncle of the deceased to indicate that the breath has left the body — in other words, to announce the death. The female companion of the male cordyline is the humid coleus, which also represents breath, spirit, the life force, and is taken to the maternal relatives to announce a birth. See below and the story *The Hut*.

- ⁸² In Melanesian culture, the first name does not situate the person with respect to kinship relations and so should not be used within the clan, just as the direct form of designation, ‘my husband’, ‘my sister’, etc., should be avoided. Giving precedence here to social relations, and hence place, is a way used by Gorodé to adopt a Kanak perspective and show the privileged relation of people to the land via kinship.
- ⁸³ The *Petit Larousse* is a single-volume dictionary and encyclopaedia, which has made its way into an enormous number of French households.
- ⁸⁴ *Tribu* has the meaning of Kanak community here, on ‘customary lands’.
- ⁸⁵ This bears witness to the heritage of Christianity that made the fact of being an unmarried mother, particularly for an adolescent, a taboo subject well into the 1960s.
- ⁸⁶ Like so many other streets of downtown Noumea, the rue Georges Clemenceau is named after a significant figure in Third Republican France, particularly from the time of World War I, as in the case here of the French Prime Minister of the day. In the local European-descendant New Caledonian psyche, WWI was seen as a period of growth through destruction, when the colony sent its young men to the slaughter in sacrificial atonement for the ‘sins of the fathers’, who had been banished from France a half-century earlier to end their days as convicts in the penal colony that New Caledonia had become (1864–97).
- ⁸⁷ ‘Sister’ should be understood here in the sense of ‘traditional’ custom (cf. the previous story ‘*Utê Mûrûnû*’). What the narrator does not yet know here is that they are also really biological sisters, both having the same father.
- ⁸⁸ The *Place des Cocotiers* is the central square of downtown Noumea. It derived its name from the fact that the land, reclaimed in 1861 from the sea, on which the square was built, had coconut trees along the shore. Subsequently, and for a long time, however, there were, ironically, no coconut trees there at all — rather exotic flame trees — until a concerted effort in town-planning over the past decade has beautified the *Place* and given it again some justification for the name. See *Nouméa* (p.172).

- ⁸⁹ In Melanesian culture, the generation of great-grandchildren is thought to reproduce that of the great-grandparents. Such identification is often made explicit through the device of homonymy.
- ⁹⁰ This is a statue at one end of the Place des Cocotiers, from which all distances in New Caledonia are calculated. Inaugurated in 1893, on the 40th anniversary of French annexation of New Caledonia, it is a symbol of late 19th-century (Third Republic) Republican values. See *Nouméa* (p.74) and *La Nouvelle-Calédonie* (p.78).
- ⁹¹ Gving some bank notes wrapped in cloth (the so-called '*monnaie kanak*') is a mandatory gesture in ceremonial custom that is even commonly performed in greeting in everyday life, what is called in the French of New Caledonia *faire la coutume*. But here there is added significance in the gesture, as the story will reveal.
- ⁹² Tulem is a local sugary soft drink.
- ⁹³ He is, in fact, her grandfather and she is his (classificatory or customary) mother. That is why, although young, she is being treated as an adult and why there is no irony in the expression.
- ⁹⁴ He is the paternal grandfather of the two brothers and the grandfather, on the 'uterine' or maternal side, of the two women.
- ⁹⁵ In this kinship system, a great-grandfather and his great-grandchildren are seen as being equivalent.
- ⁹⁶ The *pilou* is a Kanak ceremonial dance.
- ⁹⁷ The maternal or 'uterine' side of the family is, for Melanesians, the one that gives life. At death, the body and all the deceased's personal belongings are returned to the maternal side. The 'other relatives' here referred to is a term with wider application than the paternal side as such. The term designates all those who belong to or accompany the paternal clan. The crucial distinction here between 'maternals' (*utérins*) and 'others' is between those who have a 'blood relation' (maternal side) and those who do not.
- ⁹⁸ The narrative perspective has now shifted to being that of the recent past become present. Hence the use of the present-perfect tense rather than the preterit.
- ⁹⁹ The first-born son has a special role to play in the family and so receives a particular education. It is he who is guarantor of the clan's reproduction. He is therefore the one who has to learn

everything about kinship relations and ceremonies. Accordingly, he goes with his father and grandfather to important events, in order to see and learn as much as he can in anticipation of his assuming the main responsibilities within the family.

100 This is now the narrative of that grandfather told from the perspective of a female cousin who had been in love with him when she was young. She was intended for another, however, and he married her sister.

101 This was the mandatory labour introduced under the *régime de l'Indigénat* (1887–1946).

102 This use of the term '*tribu*' here designates the pre-war reserves on which segregated Melanesians were forced to live.

103 As indicated above (note 6), during the *régime de l'Indigénat*, Kanaks could not move around at night without special permission.

104 The proper name of the Loyalty island, written in its Melanesian (Paicî) form, is 'Uvea', rather than its French form of 'Ouvéa'. The so-called 'mission dresses' are made of this fabric embroidered with flowers, shells and other decorations.

105 This coffee picking is part of the forced labour referred to above under the *régime de l'Indigénat*.

106 That is to say he is her grandson according to custom, being the grandson of her sister. The narrator never had children of her own, as we have just learned. This grandson is, moreover, the ex-husband of the female narrator of the first part of the story.

107 That is, up in the mountains. Gorodé simply uses the expression 'up there' (*là-haut*) to make this specific spatial reference. In this regard, her use of deixis is a transcription into French of a Kanak perspective. See below, note 99.

108 This is now the third perspective on the death of the grandfather, conveyed here by the narrative of his brother according to custom.

109 See above, note 97.

110 The *manou* is a loin cloth. See above, note 3.

111 Gavorche designates an impish daring child, from the name of the Persian street-land in Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*.

- ¹¹² This grandson is the ex-husband of the first female narrator. See above, note 96.
- ¹¹³ ‘Doo’ (from the musical term for the keynote of a scale — ‘do’ or ‘doo’ in French) here designates Christian songs.
- ¹¹⁴ Cöumâ is the mountain Mé Maoya in Paicî.
- ¹¹⁵ See above, note 71.
- ¹¹⁶ This is particularly scandalous, given the role of uncles in Kanak life. As the ‘maternals’ (*utérins*), they are the ‘guardians of life’. As represented here by Gorodé, this behaviour is indicative of a certain decadence in morality and custom, i.e., culture.
- ¹¹⁷ This is the *Brevet de collège*, a French national exam that students take, usually at the age of 14.
- ¹¹⁸ ‘Kanak’ is the name given to New Caledonia by the independence movement which proclaimed itself a self-styled government of the ‘independent nation’ of ‘Kanak’ in 1984, with Jean-Marie Tjibaou as its head.
- ¹¹⁹ The ‘Ecoles Populaires Kanak’ (the Kanak People’s Schools), set up in the 1980s following rising calls for the independence of New Caledonia and the creation of the FLNKS (*Front de Libération National Kanak et Socialiste*). One feature of these schools was that instruction was given in the vernacular. Déwé Gorodé taught for a time in these schools on the east coast of the New Caledonian mainland.
- ¹²⁰ JSD: ‘Jeunes stagiaires pour le développement’ (Young Trainees for Development). A post-Matignon Accords initiative supposedly to prepare young Melanesians for the future, this program did not really achieve the anticipated outcome, the trainees in question often being employed by local councils for half a year doing menial tasks before returning to being ‘unemployed’. The term is therefore used here ironically to designate, through a play on words, the local feeling about the JSD program, by transforming the acronym into ‘Jeunes sous-développés’ (Under-Developed Youth).
- ¹²¹ Another Matignon Accords initiative, the ‘400 cadres’ program, was designed to produce the future local managers, both Kanak and Caldoche, that the territory was deemed to be in need of. This program also has not been an unqualified success.

- ¹²² These are traditional French nursery rhymes with European, that is non-Kanak, references.
- ¹²³ *Kaneka* is a popular local type of music. Reggae-inspired, it emerged in New Caledonia in the 1980s, first as the music of contemporary Kanak youth, as the name suggests, and was particularly associated with a pro-independence stance. While Kanak bands still dominate the local *Kaneka* music scene, the music has since broadened its appeal and is now popular with young people — and increasingly the not-so-young — from across the ethnic spectrum in New Caledonia, becoming even a commercial enterprise with a booming local record industry.
- ¹²⁴ *Tapéras* is a corruption of the English word ‘temperance’, which refers to Protestant religious songs sung in certain ceremonies, for example, during the night following a burial, and to combat alcoholism. But the corruption is here more than a linguistic one, as the whole meaning of the term has been inverted. Today, when someone is said to be ‘*en train de chanter des tapéras*’ (‘singing *tapéras*’), it means that they are on a drinking binge.
- ¹²⁵ ‘*Les événements*’ (‘the events’ or ‘the troubles’) is the euphemism used to refer to the years of civil strife that divided New Caledonia into two camps (pro- and anti-independence) during the time of political radicalisation and bi-polarisation in the 1980s. Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s assassination in 1989 on the Loyalty island of Ouvéa at the hands of a fellow Kanak, during a ceremony commemorating the lifting of the period of mourning that followed the deaths of 19 Kanaks killed by French military forces a year earlier, is often thought to signal the end of these years of ‘*les événements*’ — that many had hoped would finish with the signing of the Matignon Accords the previous June.
- ¹²⁶ That is, from Metropolitan France.
- ¹²⁷ The *roussette* (*Pteropus genus*) is a New Caledonian bat which, stewed with fruits, is considered by many Caldoches and Kanaks alike to be a local delicacy.
- ¹²⁸ New Caledonia’s prison at the entry to the district of Nouville, not far from central Noumea, where Déwé Gorodé spent some time in the 1970s (twice in 1974 and once in 1977), as a result of her political activities.

- ¹²⁹ These football matches are broadcast live by French television. Given the time difference between Europe and New Caledonia, this means that the men were watching them at all hours of the night.
- ¹³⁰ This is a ceremonial hut in a Kanak village.
- ¹³¹ Ao designates 'grandfather' in Paicî, just as Gèè designates 'grandmother'.
- ¹³² Adi is often called 'Kanak money' (*'monnaie kanak'*), a rather unfortunate term to designate, typically, a piece of ceremonial cloth wrapped around a stick of wood offered as greeting to one's host. 'Adi' thereby symbolises the 'path of alliances' and the relation to the land. It is an object that represents the clans, and so has a particular importance at ceremonial occasions such as births, marriages, deaths and exchanges of land.
- ¹³³ This is, of course, an earth oven.
- ¹³⁴ Given the 'isolation' of many Kanak villages, and the early start to the school day (7.30 to 8am), children must be ready as early as 5am, if they want to catch the school bus that services the tribal lands on its way to the schools in the municipalities. At the other end of the day, it may well be 5pm before they arrive back home.
- ¹³⁵ This expression does not refer to their physical arrival at the end of their trip, but to the fact that the path of alliance (in French, *le chemin commun des alliances*) between the two clans has been disrupted by death. That is why the arriving maternal uncle can make a speech referring to the end of the journey for his hosts. In French, the word '*hôte*' can mean both 'host' and 'guest', but it is Kanak custom that prevails here, as it is the host clan into which the deceased man had married whose path, in this particular case, has come to an end more than that of the maternal clan come to retrieve their son as well as bury him.
- ¹³⁶ Ajië is the language of the east coast area of the New Caledonian mainland, around Houailou, a neighbouring linguistic region to that of Paicî.
- ¹³⁷ This is a reference to the cultivation of cannabis, which has become a kind of 'cottage industry' in some areas.

- ¹³⁸ *Syzygium moloccense*, Myrtaceae family, sometimes called Malay apples, the fruits are given as offerings to the ancestors. 'Guide to the plants of the Kanak Path', ADCK, p.26.
- ¹³⁹ *Pwêêdi* means the younger son in Paicî.
- ¹⁴⁰ See above on the classificatory system of kinship.
- ¹⁴¹ This is a further example of the criss-crossing complexity of kinship relations.
- ¹⁴² Here this is a very small and rare conch, which thus makes it a particularly valuable *âdi* (personal communication from author).
- ¹⁴³ This is a particularly strong objection, as the main pathway leading up to the chief's hut in a Kanak village is normally looked after with meticulous care, not only by the clan's current inhabitants, but, by extension, by the ancestors, whose role it is to watch over the living. The force of their criticism comes, therefore, from its being directed, beyond its immediate targets, who have come to seek a girl's hand in marriage, at the whole of the lineage proposing an alliance. See Alban Bensa, *Ethnologie et Architecture*.
- ¹⁴⁴ Kanak syntax is similar to that of French here, in that circumstantial phrases precede the main proposition, which is thrown to the end of the sentence.
- ¹⁴⁵ A *bougna* is a traditional dish made of chicken, fish, taro, yam and other vegetables, wrapped in cloth and baked for several hours in the ground.
- ¹⁴⁶ The south-east of the mainland of New Caledonia, referred to here as 'the red land', is particularly rich in mineral deposits. This, together with a century's practice of open-cut nickel mining, has given a deep rust colour to the landscape.
- ¹⁴⁷ The point is that the brother who has left home to work in the mining industry in the south-east of the country understands this, her language. He is the only one in his family to do so, signifying the exclusion of the others.
- ¹⁴⁸ This small edible nut is burned to obtain a dark cream that people put on their face for mourning ceremonies. This particularly concerns those mourners watching over the corpse, who rub the cream all over their face as a sign of their withdrawal

from the world of the living, at the same time as protecting themselves through the application of this mask.

¹⁴⁹ This is again an instance of Gorodé's 'Kanak-French' syntax, whereby the main proposition of the sentence follows the protocol of circumstance.

¹⁵⁰ The gift of clairvoyance is the heritage of an ancient practice. Clairvoyants were normally ex-priests, but this is not the case here, in this modern context of folklore and falsification. In an interview, Déwé Gorodé has said that, while she considers *la sorcellerie* to be a perfectly natural part of Kanak life, 'There are a good many self-proclaimed faith healers. I denounce the charlatanism that is practised in order to exert pressure, out of self-interest, to keep a certain power over people ...' 'Entretien avec Déwé Gorodé', *Notre Librairie*, p.82. (our translation).

¹⁵¹ The former name of Martin Plaza, the site of Sydney's GPO. Many Sydney residents still use the term 'Martin Place'. In also doing so, the narrator thus demonstrates an 'insider's' familiarity with the city.

¹⁵² The name given familiarly and metonymically to Sydney Airport (officially called Kingsford Smith, from the name of the pioneering aviator), due to its location in the suburb of the same name.

¹⁵³ This refers to the New Caledonian regional elections of 18 November, 1984, boycotted by the newly formed (September 1984) FLNKS (*Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste*) under the leadership of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, who on 1 December, 1984, proclaimed himself head of a Provisional Government of Kanaky. The election boycott could also take a more active form as, for example, the spectacular gesture of Eloi Machoro smashing the ballot box in the Town Hall of the east coast township of Canala with an axe and burning the ballot papers on 18 November, 1984. This text is therefore narrated from the perspective of 1985, at the height of the period of civil strife known as '*les événements*' (the 'events'/'troubles').

¹⁵⁴ The months, indeed years, following 18 November were tense and often violent as New Caledonia was increasingly split between pro- and anti-independence forces, resulting in much bloodshed, including the killing of Eloi Machoro by the French

military in January 1985. The whole period from 1984 to 1988–89 is known euphemistically as that of ‘*les événements*’.

¹⁵⁵ The so-called ‘carnation revolution’ in April 1974, which overthrew 30 years of authoritarian rule in Portugal and marked the beginning of the end of the country’s remaining ‘empire’. Most colonies (for example, Angola, Mozambique) became independent the following year. East Timor was an exception, being annexed by Indonesia on 5 December, 1975, albeit after a brief period of ‘independence’ following Fretilin’s declaration of independence a week earlier on 28 November. It remained under Indonesian control until the dramatic events of 1999, leading up to and beyond the referendum on independence. The United Nations confirmed East Timor as an independent nation on 20 May, 2001.

¹⁵⁶ ‘Eloi’ is Eloi Machoro, the charismatic Kanak pro-independence activist who was killed in January 1985.

¹⁵⁷ *Maubere* is the name of the indigenous people of the island of Timor.

¹⁵⁸ Fretilin is the Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of East Timor.

¹⁵⁹ The provisional government of Kanaky, with Jean-Marie Tjibaou at its head, was set up on 1 December, 1984.

¹⁶⁰ The FLNKS held its first congress since the outbreak of *les événements* in February 1985 at Nakéty (near Canala), the home of Eloi Machoro, the independence leader assassinated the previous month. In line with the FLNKS’s decision to set up a ‘Provisional Government of Kanaky’, this congress called for the creation of appropriate political, economic and social structures. Among the latter was the setting up of the network of *Ecoles Populaires Kanak* (EPK). Déwé Gorodé was given the mission to get involved in this initiative and taught for three years in the EPK in her home township of Ponérihouen on the east coast. At its height, the EPK system had schools on the mainland at La Conception, Canala, Houaïlou, Poindimié, Ponérihouen, Pouébo and Yaté, as well as on the Loyalty Islands of Ouvéa and Lifou. Today, this network has been reduced to

schools at Canala on the southern east coast of the mainland, and Gossanah on the island of Ouvéa.

¹⁶¹ Named after the then High Commissioner to New Caledonia, Edgard Pisani. Pisani was a socialist member of the European Parliament who had previously been an Agricultural Minister under de Gaulle. He was appointed High Commissioner to New Caledonia in December 1984, at a time of great tension in the territory that saw numerous roadblocks and barricades. The 'Pisani plan' for 'independence-in-association', proposed on 7 January, 1985, provided in theory for Kanak sovereignty and a re-organisation of land tenure, with special safeguards for the other communities of the island. It was to be presented at a referendum in July 1985, to be followed by a transfer of sovereignty in January 1986, assuming, that is, that the referendum voted in favour of the proposal. However, as this was highly unlikely under existing constitutional arrangements — and there was no plan for constitutional change — the Pisani plan was doomed to failure. In any case, the tenor of events on the ground in New Caledonia in early 1985, with an escalation of violence causing the deaths of Caldoches and Kanaks alike, including that of Eloi Machoro at the hands of the security forces, meant that the plan would not even reach the referendum stage. It was abandoned in July 1985, to be replaced by the 'Fabius Plan', after the name of the then French Prime Minister, Laurent Fabius, which proposed the division of New Caledonia into four 'regions', each with its own government.

¹⁶² Grace Mera Melisa (1946–2002); Julie Sipolo (who now uses her maiden name, Jully Makini), 1953–; Vanessa Griffen, 1952– ; are, like Déwé Gorodé herself, Pacific women of the post-war generation involved in social action, particularly in the field of women's rights and well-being, and who are writers.

¹⁶³ *Moai* is the name given to the statues of Easter Island.

¹⁶⁴ *Araucarian* is the name of the indigenous Indian people of Chile.

¹⁶⁵ This is a reference to the chief's hut that is constructed at the end of the avenue of araucaria pines. Kanak villages, like the Kanak chiefs themselves, were subject to periodic renewal as part of a social dynamic. Kanak culture has often been thought to be

an ‘immaterial’ one. But the continued presence of the ancestors and their importance in the daily life of Kanak society is quite tangible. See Alban Bensa, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie. Un paradis dans la tourmente*; and *Ethnologie et Architecture*, by the same author.

166 The coleus is considered to be a female plant, the symbol of life. Here, the paternal clan, through the father of the child, is taking a sheath of this plant to announce the birth to the maternal uncles, *les utérins*, who, in Kanak culture, are held to be the custodians of a person’s life.

167 See the above story entitled *The Cordyline*.

168 This is the *flèche faitière* in French, the distinctive roof peak that sits atop the Melanesian *case* (hut) in New Caledonia.

169 A *tibo* is a supernatural being that is reputed for its long, sagging breasts that trap humans, particularly children.

170 *Nûrûga* (*Lepturus repens*) is the grass that is used for the lawn planted around a hut.

171 Tropical Cyclone Gladys devastated New Caledonia in April 1996.

172 *Pwârâ-pwa* is a verse with eight feet (personal communication from author). In his *Dictionnaire Paicî-François*, Rivierre (p.205) refers to it simply as ‘poetry’.

173 *Tâgade* are Kanak tales, legends, stories.

174 Ao is ‘grandfather’ in Paicî.

175 This grass (*Lepturus repens*) is used for the lawn around a hut.

176 The ‘u’ are supernatural creatures haunting woods and waterways.

177 Ajië is the language of the central east coast of the mainland.

The lines mean ‘This is not my country. My country is far away.’

178 Such land occupation, particularly on the east coast, was a common event during the period of unrest, ‘*les événements*’.

179 The *banyan tree* (*Ficus prolixa*) is a very sacred tree, as it is the dwelling place of the ancestors and spirits.

180 The use of the future tense here, to indicate the force of the event, and the impact of dream or volition upon the events of the world, shows how Déwé Gorodé can incorporate a Kanak world-view into the French language — or assimilate the latter into the former. As she has said both in personal communication

and in a published interview: 'I was asked about making certain changes to my use of tense, of course, but I refused, as this is something important to me ... for instance, where you could have the conditional in place of the future. If I chose to put the future, it is because we are already dealing with an action that the narrator is living or is going to do, an action already under way, because the narrator projects himself or herself into time, whereas with the conditional, there is doubt. In our Kanak way of thinking, we have the same word for 'thinking' and 'doing'. This projection of thought is very important.'

¹⁸¹ This is a reference to the Kanak uprising of 1878, led by Chief Ataï. It became a rallying point for Kanak resistance during the independence movement of the 1980s. In August 1974, Déwé Gorodé formed the 'Groupe 1878' with Elie Poigoune and others, which was the forerunner of the political party PALIKA (*Parti de Libération Kanak*, set up in 1976), whose strategy was to reject the validity of French laws and which was more radical than Jean-Marie Tjibaou's *Union Calédonienne*. An indication of the evolution of events since then is the fact that today Déwé Gorodé is a PALIKA representative in the New Caledonian *Congrès* (Parliament) and, since April 2001, Vice-President of the New Caledonian 'government'.

¹⁸² New Caledonia served as the Allied Command Centre for the war in the South Pacific, more than one million GIs passing through the island between March 1942 and the end of the war. The American base remained there until early 1946.

¹⁸³ The French original does not reveal the fact that the lieutenant doctor is a woman. It plays on gender confusion throughout this paragraph, using the masculine '*le médecin*' as the 'neutral' form for 'doctor'. This results in the masculine personal pronoun '*il*' being subsequently used in its place. Similarly, the possessive adjective '*ses*' can designate either 'his' or 'her' in French, and the indirect pronoun object '*lui*' may refer to either masculine or feminine object. The text also avoids a verbal construction after 'Sleeping Beauty' that would have made the female subject explicit. Instead, it uses the subject-neutral, adverbial proposition, *au réveil* — 'on awakening'.

- ¹⁸⁴ The French original, '*malicieux*', can mean 'malicious' as well as 'mischievous'.
- ¹⁸⁵ See above, note 180, for comments on Déwé Gorodé's use of the future tense.
- ¹⁸⁶ Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is a town in the Carnegie region of Southern France, which is a site of pilgrimage for Christian gypsies.
- ¹⁸⁷ The French word used here is '*sarouel*', which designates the baggy pants worn in certain parts of North Africa.
- ¹⁸⁸ The French uses the familiar form '*tu*' here, which has the surprise effect of turning her as if into his lover.
- ¹⁸⁹ The original employs the vividly imaginative expressions: '*barons*', '*poppers*', '*valises*' and '*double-cabines*'.
- ¹⁹⁰ It was on 24 September, 1853, that France proclaimed New Caledonia a French territory.
- ¹⁹¹ Dien Bien Phu was the site of the famous battle from March to May 1954 that ended in the defeat of French troops, paving the way for the Geneva Accords of the same year and the end of French colonial rule in the country.
- ¹⁹² Tom Hagen was one of the early Europeans to make a fortune out of mining in New Caledonia. He founded a dynasty, the family home being the *Château Hagen*, a landmark above the city of Noumea, which, having been bought by the Municipality in 1998, is now being turned into a museum and cultural centre.
- ¹⁹³ The future tense is employed here by Gorodé to emphasise the importance of the event, particularly from the perspective of the speaker. As Gorodé has herself said on the subject: 'What is important is the relation to time in the mind of the narrator. I begin with that, with regard to the fact that the narrator is in the process of relating.' *Le Littérature de la Nouvelle-Calédonie Notre Librairie*, p.85.
- ¹⁹⁴ French here uses the imperfect tense, '*brossait*', giving a sense of repetition of action in the past. At first sight, this is surprising, as one might have expected a continuity of the future tense. Yet, for Gorodé, there is no surprise, given the narrative perspective announced above: 'Sometimes, I deliberately use such and such a tense, even if it means having different tenses in the one

sentence. What is important is the relation to time in the mind of the narrator ... Sometimes, you want to tell a story that is in the past, but as you are telling it, you become so caught up in the story, as if you were inside it, now. There are temporal transpositions, which is why I might use different tenses in the one and the same sentence.' *Le Littérature de la Nevelle-Calédonia, Notre Librairie*, p.85.

- ¹⁹⁵ Here the French original uses the simple past tense, '*avoua*', to give an external summary of the event.
- ¹⁹⁶ The *Tour de Côte* was the general name given to the ferry services that plied up and down the coasts of the *Grande Terre* (Mainland) of New Caledonia from 1872 until 1936. A combination of private and state-supported operators, it was the main channel of communication between different parts of the island.
- ¹⁹⁷ The Indonesians in New Caledonia are still called '*les Javanais*', as Java was the island in the Indonesian archipelago from which most Indonesian migrants who began to arrive in New Caledonia from 1895 came. A recent book (2002) romancing the subject is *La Bayou* by Liliane de Saint-Omerand. See also the thesis by Fida Larue, '*Les Javanais en Nouvelle-Calédonie*', French University of the Pacific, 1995.
- ¹⁹⁸ This paragraph again makes unusual use of the future tense to indicate the importance of the event related, indeed, the anticipated certainty of its occurrence.
- ¹⁹⁹ The famous *Deux Chevaux*, the classic 'people's car' launched by Citroën after World War II.
- ²⁰⁰ A composite plant (*Ageratum conyzoides*; *Blumea pnocera*) with blue flowers.
- ²⁰¹ The '*u ladies*' are spirits of the place.
- ²⁰² *Kari* (*Curcuma longa*) is a rhizomatic plant of the Zingiberaceae family. Rivierre (p.322) identifies the Paicî term as '*nââ*'.
- ²⁰³ *Mâbi* (*Dianella nemorosa*; *Dianella stipitata*) is a kind of creeper.
- ²⁰⁴ *Pâbë* is grass of the New Caledonian savannah, belonging to the Graminaceae or Cyperaceae family (Rivierre, p.313).
- ²⁰⁵ The *ipua* is a forest tree (*Arthrochianthus*, *Pepilionaceae* family)

- ²⁰⁶ The *ambrevade* (*Cajanus cajan*, legumes group, Papilionaceae family) is a wild pea plant that comes from the Reunion Island. Its seeds are most attractive to chickens.
- ²⁰⁷ The French uses the conditional tense here, '*pourrait être*', yet the earlier verb in the sentence, '*surprit*', is in the preterit. The narrative perspective is now that of the past, when the narrator was the 10-year-old child. Past and present alternate in this story, as do the living and the dead. This kind of 'magic realism' is indicative of the temporal and ontological plurality of Kanak existence, as portrayed by Déwé Gorodé.
- ²⁰⁸ The tamanu is sometimes called an Alexandria laurel. On the seas here these are *Calophyllum inemphyllum*; in the mountains they are *Calophyllum montanum*.
- ²⁰⁹ This is a tree with fragrant flowers like jasmine that blooms during the summer and is associated by children and teachers with the long school vacation period.
- ²¹⁰ *Bagayous* are penis covers.
- ²¹¹ *Tapéras* here means — without any irony — temperance songs.
- ²¹² *Aé aé* is a traditional chant.
- ²¹³ The *pilou* is a traditional Kanak dance. Originally the property of a clan member, it was only one part of a ceremony in which a clan celebrated itself through recounting stories of the past, or for a particular custom, such as the planting or sharing of yams, or birth, marriage, etc. It is not, therefore, as is sometimes assumed, only for war preparation. The *pilou* was banned by the French colonial administration, wary of indigenous high 'pagan' spirits. It should be noted, moreover, that this word is not found in any indigenous language. See Jean-Marie Tjibaou, *Kanaké, Mélanésien de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, pp.88–89; see also Maurice Leenhardt, 'Notes d'ethnologie néo-calédonienne' in *Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie*, Book VIII, p.143.
- ²¹⁴ *Auu* is an expression of delight.
- ²¹⁵ *Jènôôrtî kôô* means 'my namesake'. The person bearing the same name as oneself is said to be one's double. See the above story *Utê Mûrûnû*.
- ²¹⁶ This infinitive indicates the force of the event.

- ²¹⁷ This topographical reference is, in the original French, indicated simply as being ‘on the other side’ (*de l’autre côté*).
- ²¹⁸ Tukakara is the spirit god of thunder.
- ²¹⁹ Civil servants, *fonctionnaires*, are on indexed salaries while working for the French State in its Overseas Departments and Territories. They receive considerable benefits that give them artificially inflated living conditions. This situation has given rise to a considerable amount of friction between these representatives of the French State and the local population — and not just Kanak, as the best-selling comic-book series, *La Brousse en folie* (1984–) by the ‘Caldoche’ Bernard Berger attests, with its caricature *fonctionnaire*, Joinville, more the subject of derision than envy.
- ²²⁰ Volunteers’ Wharf in Noumea.
- ²²¹ Again, the future tense gives the sense of something momentous that is about to happen.
- ²²² Alpha Blondy is a singer of *Keneka*, a type of reggae-inspired music popular among young New Caledonians. Groups are mainly Kanak.
- ²²³ ‘Wanted’ is the word used in the original French.
- ²²⁴ The BEP is the *Brevet d’éducation physique*, a Certificate of Technical Education. This is obtained after the last two years of high school study. It is of a standard below that of the French Baccalaureate.
- ²²⁵ This is the main library in New Caledonia, located in downtown Noumea. It has been a meeting place for generations of students.
- ²²⁶ Maspero is a Parisian publishing house, particularly identified with radical literature of the 1960s and noted for its support of Third World liberation movements.
- ²²⁷ Frantz Fanon (1925–61) was a doctor and writer from the French Antilles island of Martinique. Appointed as a psychiatrist in Algeria in the 1950s, he proclaimed a pro-independence stance during the Algerian war of independence, becoming the spokesman for the provisional government. He was a leading theoretician of national liberation movements, whose best-known work is *Peaux Noires, Masques Blancs* (*Black Skins, White Masks*).

- ²²⁸ Amilcar Cabral (1921–73) a Guinean politician who, in 1956, founded the African Party for the Independence of Portuguese Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands. He was assassinated in Conakry, the capital of Guinea and the first French colonial territory to gain its independence from France in a 1958 referendum organised by de Gaulle.
- ²²⁹ Che Guevara (1928–67), an Argentine doctor turned revolutionary who, after fighting alongside Fidel Castro in the Cuban revolution, died in Bolivia for the cause of the *guerilleros*. Beyond his legendary revolutionary status, he is known to many French due to the presence at his side of Régis Debray, a former student of the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, who was imprisoned by the Bolivian authorities and subsequently freed due to the personal intervention of President Georges Pompidou, himself a former student of the Ecole Normale Supérieure. In the 1980s, Debray became an advisor to President François Mitterrand.
- ²³⁰ Chadli Benjedid (1929–), an Algerian officer and politician who succeeded Boumediene as president of the country until he resigned in 1992.
- ²³¹ Muhammed Boumediene (1932–78), an Algerian soldier and politician who played a key role in the Algerian war of independence as leader of the National Liberation Army. He was subsequently President of Algeria from 1965 until his death.
- ²³² *Harkis* were Algerians who fought on the side of the French during the Algerian War (1954–62). Banished from Algeria when the country became independent, they have had considerable difficulty gaining recognition from the French for their efforts. This painful part of recent French history is now slowly being redressed by the French authorities.
- ²³³ It is worth noting that the author is using a series of army slang expressions here.
- ²³⁴ Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), a child poet genius and visionary, one of the great *enfants terribles* of French literature, wrote his poem, *Le Dormeur du val* (*The Sleeper in the Valley*), from which these lines are taken, as a critique of the senselessness of the

Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and, by extension, of war in general.

²³⁵ The *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation Front), a fundamentalist group that has played a leading role in the Algerian civil war over the past decade, including organising hijackings and bombings in France, accused by it of supporting Algeria's military regime that prevented a popularly elected Islamic government from taking power in 1991.

²³⁶ The 1980s saw a series of statutes and plans proposed for New Caledonia by various French Overseas Territories Ministers and High Commissioners appointed for the purpose. All failed until the Matignon Accords, negotiated in 1988, which put an end to the escalating violence of the previous four years of civil strife, *les événements*.

²³⁷ Nainville-les-Roches is a place near Paris, which was the site of a round table conference in July 1983. This conference was organised by the new Secretary of State for French Overseas Territories, Georges Lemoine, and included representatives of the *Front Indépendantiste*, led by Jean-Marie Tjibaou, and the anti-independence RPCR (*Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République*: Rally for Caledonia in the Republic), led by Jacques Lafleur. The conference recognised both the 'innate right to independence' of the Kanak people and the rights of other long-term residents of New Caledonia. It was thus doomed to fail, as there was no real follow-up to such pronouncements, but the notion that was developed at Nainville-les-Roches, that of the twin 'victims of history' (Kanak and Caldoches), was to give rise to much mythologising in New Caledonia and a certain amount of bargaining power to both local factions in subsequent negotiations on a future constitutional framework for the territory.

²²⁴ In September 1984, the *Front Indépendantiste* turned itself into a full-blown 'liberation front', the FLNKS (*Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste*: Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front). It sensed, correctly, that the socialist government in office in France since 1981 would lose power in the legislative elections scheduled for early 1986. Socialist President Mitterrand

- had proclaimed that there would be a referendum on the question of independence for New Caledonia in 1989, and the Kanak pro-independence movement wished to make the most of the moment by restricting the electoral body and reducing the time to independence. The FLNKS had boycotted the territorial elections of November 1984, and Jean-Marie Tjibaou set up a 'provisional government of Kanaky' before the end of the year.
- ²³⁹ Mare is one of the Loyalty Islands (the others being Lifou, Ouvéa, and the tiny Tige) belonging to New Caledonia, which lie to the east of the mainland.
- ²⁴⁰ The *Tour de Calédonie* is an annual bicycle race in New Caledonia, modelled on the *Tour de France*.
- ²⁴¹ Tibarama is the name of a tribe from the east coast town of Poindimié in the Paicî.
- ²⁴² Mountain pass in the *Grande Chaîne*, the mountain range running on a north-south axis down the middle of the *Grande Terre* (mainland) in New Caledonia.
- ²⁴³ French-born Secretary-General of the *Union Calédonienne*, who was shot and killed at his home on 19 September, 1981. This produced mass protests on the part of UC and *Front Indépendantiste* supporters in New Caledonia and was followed by roadblocks and the forced cancellation of the *Tour de Calédonie*. This assassination effectively brought an end to the trans-racial era of the *Union Calédonienne* as the party whose motto was '*deux couleurs, un seul peuple*' ('two colours, a single people'). It became increasingly radicalised under its next Secretary-General, Eloi Machoro.
- ²⁴⁴ This was in fact on 18 November, 1984, as the paragraph subsequently makes clear.
- ²⁴⁵ The day of the New Caledonian local elections, actively boycotted by the FLNKS through its various grassroots sections, the '*comités de lutte*' ('struggle committees').
- ²⁴⁶ So named after the then High Commissioner to New Caledonia, Georges Pisani.
- ²⁴⁷ The Matignon Accords were signed in June 1988 by Jean-Marie Tjibaou, on behalf of the pro-independence FLNKS, Jacques Lafleur, leader of the anti-independence RPCR (Rally for New

Caledonia in the Republic) and Michel Rocard, then French Prime Minister, in whose Parisian residence, the Hôtel Matignon, the ceremony took place. These accords were ratified by referendum later in the year (6 November: 80 per cent of voters in metropolitan France and other territories; 57 per cent in New Caledonia, including a 'no' vote of nearly 61 per cent in the anti-independence stronghold of the capital, Noumea), effectively putting an end to the years of civil strife known euphemistically as *les événements*.

²⁴⁸ In April 1988, on the eve of the French Presidential elections, some Kanak pro-independence radicals took 23 police officers hostage on the Loyalty Island of Ouvéa. They remained in a cave for some two weeks, until the French army lay siege, freeing the remaining hostages and killing 19 Kanaks in the process. This series of actions shocked all concerned into realising that some accommodation of the opposing parties was necessary. Following François Mitterrand's re-election as President in May 1988, a process of dialogue was instituted that led to the Matignon Accords that June (see previous note). Ouvéa was, however, to gain notoriety again the following year for a different, although related, reason. On the anniversary of the 'Ouvéa massacre' and to mark the end of the year of mourning of the dead, the FLNKS leader, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, went to the island, despite warnings that his security could not be guaranteed. There, on 5 May, 1989, along with his deputy Yeiwéné Yeiwéné and his bodyguard, Tjibaou was killed by a Kanak militant, Djumba Welly, in whose eyes the FLNKS had betrayed the Kanak cause by signing the Matignon Accords.

²⁴⁹ District of downtown Noumea, not in the least resembling its famous student-quarter namesake in Paris.

²⁵⁰ Malik or Malick Fall (1920–78) was a Senegalese writer of poetry and novels of social criticism.

²⁵¹ That is, the years known as '*les événements*'.

²⁵² AIDS has been a taboo subject in island Melanesia. The fact that a woman author here assumes the narrative voice of a male to make this confession is an indication of the willingness of Déwé Gorodé to confront important social issues, however 'shocking'

they may be deemed to be. Her gesture is all the more significant in that the general perception among Kanak men has been that AIDS is either an 'illness of women' or an 'illness of whites' (see Christine Salomon, 'Hommes et femmes: harmonie d'ensemble ou antagonisme sourd?' in *En Pays Kanak*, eds., Alban Bensa and Isabelle Leblic, 2000).

²⁵³ In Kanak culture, names are part and parcel of a complex web of designation, linked to kinship relations and custom. See above story, *The Cordyline*.

²⁵⁴ This is the usual exchange nowadays involved in the ritual ceremony of greeting. Gorodé elsewhere employs the Melanesian term, *âdi*, thereby avoiding the so-called '*monnaie kanak*' of French usage.

²⁵⁵ That is to say that these meetings are public, in contrast to some of those organised by the political parties behind closed doors.

²⁵⁶ This is, of course, the FLNKS.

²⁵⁷ Déwé Gorodé is indeed a rare example of such writing of history. Her aim, as she says, is to engage in 'a "revisiting" of history by a Kanak narrator and Kanak characters. The political discourse that I have myself used — colonisers/colonised — does not account for all the relations of perversity and ambiguity between colonisers and colonised in the past and present. Maybe I can write things differently in a novel or short story.' *Notre Librairie*, p.83.

²⁵⁸ The French expression is '*les anciens*'.

²⁵⁹ A *bougna* is a Melanesian dish made with vegetables, particularly yams and taros, as well as fish and chicken, prepared in cloth or foil and cooked under the ground for several hours.

²⁶⁰ The French uses the word '*histoire*', which can be both 'story' and 'history'.

²⁶¹ The French uses the familiar '*tu*' form for 'you'.

²⁶² This is quite a striking combination of tenses. The first verb of the sentence is in the preterit, '*trouva*', whereas the following one, '*apprendra*', is in the future, again stressing the momentous nature of the event to come, before a return to the past narrative, in the form of the final pluperfect, '*était parti*'.

About the Translator

Peter Brown is Senior Lecturer in French at The Australian National University. He has on several occasions been a Visiting Professor at the University of New Caledonia. In 2000, for the Eighth Pacific Arts Festival held in Noumea, he edited the special edition in English of the publication *Mwà Vée*, entitled *Living Heritage. Kanak Culture Today*, on behalf of the *Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak*. He is currently editor of the Pandanus series 'Voices from the Francophone Pacific' presenting in English contemporary works from the French-speaking Pacific.

The first volume in a new series publishing Francophone writers of the Pacific in English, *The Kanak Apple Season* presents the short fiction of Déwé Gorodé, the leading Kanak author of New Caledonia. This remarkable collection reflects the ethnic complexities of the colonial past of New Caledonia. The author's approach to language reveals an original voice that compels attention. Drawing on the heritage of blood-lines, family, cultural tradition and colonialism, Gorodé takes her reader on a journey into the Kanak world providing fascinating insight into the culture of one of Australia's nearest — yet least known — neighbours.

Déwé Gorodé was born in 1949 at Ponérihouen on the central east coast of New Caledonia. She grew up in a family that was influenced by the Protestant faith and the oral heritage of her people. Like many in her generation, she became politically active in the drive for independence, and her growing militancy soon brought her into trouble with the colonial authorities. After the Noumea Accord in 1998, she formally entered politics as an elected representative to the New Caledonian *Congrès*. Since April 2001, she has been Vice-President of the New Caledonian Government.

Déwé Gorodé has published four volumes of poetry: *Sous les cendres des conques* (1985), *Par les temps qui courent* (1996), *Dire le vrai* (1999) and *Pierre noire* (1997), and two volumes of short stories: *Uté Mûrûnû* (1994) and *L'Agenda* (1996).



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