

Alleluia for a Garden Woman

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Translated from the French by Asselin Charles
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*Et le cri que, la bouche tordue, cet être, en vain?, veut faire entendre
est un immense alléluia perdu dans le silence sans fin.*

— Georges Bataille

FIRST CANTO

One Friday evening, Aunt Zaza came to dinner at our house. She arrived a bit disappointed because no one in the family was available to accompany her to the country that particular week. Her air of annoyance enhanced her charms which quickly changed our humble dinner into a princely banquet. It was amazing: the glasses were finely cut baccarat crystal; the plates came from Sèvres; the cutlery was all of sparkling silver; and the tablecloth had been embroidered by Aubusson hands. The water from the tap had the flavour of champagne, and the bread tasted like some very rich cheese. The aroma of the fish soup conjured gourmet delights. The light in the

room did not come from the lamp but rather from Zaza's gold-studded green eyes. I was simply fascinated by her breasts.

"Why can't Olivier come to the farm with me?" she asked.

"You know why, Zaza," replied my mother, "Olivier must do his homework. Besides, he is too careless in the ocean, insisting on going farther out than everybody else when the gulf is infested with sharks. Accidents happen so easily."

"You're exaggerating, Agnès," said my father. "Olivier now knows how to behave properly. Nothing untoward will happen to him in Zaza's company."

"Very well," said my mother resignedly. "If he has an accident, however, you will be responsible."

"The mountain air will do him a lot of good. This boy is always locked in his books. Olivier, you won't swim too far from the beach, will you, darling? Promise?" appealed my aunt. I was speechless; I could only nod affirmatively.

"The best thing," continued Isabelle, "would be for you to come and spend the night at my home. That way we can be on the horses and on our way at dawn."

"Good idea," agreed my mother, while my father could not conceal his pride and, perhaps, even envy in seeing me leave alone with the most illustrious family member.

She had just turned thirteen when people in Jacmel began to speak of her beauty. Three years later, scouts from Port-au-Prince came to make her a *carnaval* queen. During the parade, men and women in the capital were frenetic with admiration. Everything about Isabelle Ramonet was so spectacular, like an offering that said: "Take a good look at me, for it's only once every century that one sees a human being whose flesh patently proclaims her a dazzling adventure of the species!"

On the wake of Isabelle's float, the crowd's adulation took mystical forms. A young man, after exchanging a smile with the queen, climbed up a coconut tree on the avenue in one breath, whimpering like a wounded animal. A peasant of mature age called out in a strangled voice, "I'll give you one hand if you throw me a kiss!" From her towering throne, Isabelle immediately sent a kiss to the stranger.

Keeping his promise, he pulled a huge knife from his pocket and

chopped his left wrist with a single stroke of incredible violence. Then, he took hold of the severed hand and threw it at the feet of Aunt Isa, splattering the bottom of her royal dress with blood. The mad man was led away discreetly, and the festival continued with increased frenzy. After the *carnaval* was over, hundreds of suitors asked the young girl to marry them. Graciously, she refused them all and returned unceremoniously to Jacmel where an arch of triumph was awaiting her at the entrance to this little southwestern Haitian town. “This is like the return of a princess, now a saint, in The Arabian Nights,” declared a local newspaper the following day.

A year later, Isabelle married the son of a coffee exporter; soon after the wedding, he was killed in a motorcycle accident. The rumour circulated that Daniel Locroy had died of a mysterious disease which he caught in the arms of his wife: the more he made love to her, the more his genitals shrunk, like the donkey skin in the fable. When he woke up one morning and found his penis had quite disappeared and only one testicle remained he killed himself with a single bullet through his head. A doctor stopped these mad stories because he had seen Locroy’s badly mangled body at the foot of a tree on the Meyer road, next to the wrecked bike.

New aspiring lovers appeared under the window of the young widow, but she adamantly informed the panting crowd that she had no intention of remarrying. When she ignored the parties organized in her honor, the horse rides, the acrostics, the love poems and the letters addressed to her, the *wangas*, and the provincial intrigues—all inspired by hot blood, she became the mythic emblem of the town. Her presence became one with the landscape, the old trees of the Place d’Armes, the waters of the gulf with the rusty hulk of the Albano, and the river La Gosseline. So, when Isabelle Ramonet left Jacmel for a prolonged stay in Europe only her closest relatives suffered from her absence.

On her return, everything would have been exactly the same as before but for an article in *Le Nouvelliste* that revealed that:

The still ravishing Isabelle Ramonet, the unforgettable queen of the 19—carnaval, has kindly declined a European director’s offer to act in the movies, preferring instead to return to her native town in the southwest. Some day, when the boredom of her life becomes

more oppressive than usual, she will bitterly regret having turned her back on such glory. Undeniably, we believe that Isabelle has lost the unique opportunity she was given to bring fame and glory to our little country as the new Greta Garbo.

Although it is unfounded, we still have hope that it is not too late for her to reconsider her incredible decision. This is what we at this newspaper and her thousands of admirers wish for her beauty in the future.

Aunt Zaza listened to this nonsense disdainfully, as she did to all the slanders that greeted her return. As indifferent to praise as she was to insult, she proceeded to build the first movie theatre in Jacmel with Locroy's inheritance. There I saw *Fanfan la Tulipe*, *Mathias Sandorf*, Charlie Chaplain's comedies and many other silent movies. Next, there was a rumour in Jacmel that she had built the theatre in memory of a famous actor who had been her lover in Paris before he finally left her for a Scandinavian star. That famous actor, so the rumour went, was a lucky man: had he persisted in his passion he too would have died in an accident on some European road. Such great beauty could only cause misfortune. It was whispered that the money used for the theater came from magic, from the pits that Isabelle's mother, the widow of General César Ramonet, had dug in her garden several years earlier. At the time, surrounded by scandal, she had discovered several jars full of gold *louis* and precious tableware. For respite from all this malicious gossip in Jacmel, Aunt Zaza made frequent stays in the country. She owned a farm at the place called "The Enchanted Mountain," on top of a cliff overhanging the ocean. She spent most of her weekends there, and, to avoid being given lovers drawn from the same well as those of the theatre, she always had a female friend or her mother along as chaperone.

In our family, the worship of Isa was not just tied to her physical charms. We constantly celebrated her tact, her goodness of heart, her simplicity, her generosity toward the poor. She was always ready to do a favour, to fulfil others' needs with her kind initiatives, never asking anything in return. She did not have the bursts of temper, the caprices, the fits of vanity, the mincing manners and the

eccentricities which so often spoil the beauty of women. She was not a sacred monster, but rather “a sword with an infinitely tender heart,” as a friend of her father’s had called her one day. For me, her favourite nephew, Aunt Zaza was inseparable from the screen that shaped the evenings of my adolescence. She was a dispenser of beautiful images. She would often come to the little theatre and sit by my side; her presence would add a new dimension to the film I was watching. For a long time I allowed myself to imagine that her flesh radiated the beam of light which narrated the dream-rousing stories.

When I turned fifteen, however, I began to admire Zaza for what she was in real life. Seated beside her in the dark, I began to neglect the tales on the screen and instead focused intensely on a movie that agitated my being in an altogether different way. Isa would innocently pass her hand through my hair, pat the nape of my neck, or my naked legs without being aware that her affection melted me from head to toe. I sensed her female presence as some animals sense the coming of a great storm or an earthquake.

SECOND CANTO

That night I slept on a folding bed in a room next to my aunt’s. “We must go to bed early,” she had said, chastely kissing me on the forehead. I had a lot of trouble getting to sleep; the ominous feeling I had was so intense that I felt my veins were ready to burst.

It was still dark when we left town. I was a young king riding through his happily sleeping kingdom, accompanied by my cousin, an exotic princess. We rode for nearly two hours, our horses galloping rhythmically, at the same pace. Zaza was a good rider. She was laughing, her hair blown by the wind, her body erect as if ready for flight. I was jealous of her horse, a thoroughbred who seemed conscious that he was carrying the Star of the city on his back. When we arrived on the mountain, we entrusted our horses to the peasant who took care of the farm.

“I wasn’t expecting you to get here so early,” said Laudrun. “We

came at full speed,” answered my aunt apologetically. “Olivier is a good horseman,” Laudrun said affectionately.

“He must be careful in the ocean,” my aunt said. “How about going there right now?” she proposed cheerfully.

A few minutes later, we were walking together down the goat path which, after numerous twists and turns through fields of corn and sweet-potato, ended suddenly against a pile of steep rocks whose sharp edges were gleaming in the mountain sun like sleeping lizards. After about three hundred yards of these jagged rocks, the path became gentler as, without warning, it suddenly revealed a beach of smooth, white sand. As we walked down, Isabelle leaned on my shoulder to keep her balance. I did not dare look at her in her bathing suit, but, once on the beach, she ran ahead of me, rushing towards the ocean. All at once, images began to develop in my head, haphazardly growing, swirling, chasing one another like banana leaves in a cyclone. I was born for the vital rhythm of the woman flying before me.

Her curves were lyrically, harmoniously, unfolding themselves in a flaming symphony of glands, fibers, tissues, nerves, muscles, flesh.

We started to swim vigorously toward the shore, and the swell finally swept us onto the beach. We lay there, out of breath. We looked at each other, laughing, not able as yet to articulate even one word.

“Don’t you think the water is fantastic?”

“It’s wonderful,” I replied.

“You’re glad you came?”

“Very glad, Aunt Isa.”

“My goodness, you’ve grown so tall!”

“.....”

“You’re already taller than I am.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Of course you are, darling. Want to bet?”

We stood up in one jump to compare our heights. She was indeed barely taller.

She was then thirty-two years old; I was exactly half her age.

“How fast time has flown, Olivier!”

“.....”

“I remember the day of your birth as if it were last Thursday. You were born feet first, with a veil over your head. Before you had been five minutes in the world, you were laughing. I was the first to rock you, the first to discover your eyes were as green as mine. You wouldn’t stop laughing and wriggling your feet and hands, as if warmly greeting the world you had just come into. Let’s call him Olivier, I proposed to Agnès.”

“Why Olivier?”

“Because it used to be a symbol of wisdom and glory.”

“I am neither wise nor famous.”

“You’re very wise for your age, and you shall be famous.”

“What about Isabelle? What does that symbolize?”

“It’s a *café-au-lait* colour, like mine. You can say an ‘isabelle dress’, or an ‘isabelle horse’ .”

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

“There’s a charming tale about that. Once upon a time, there was an Archduchess of Austria whose husband was besieging a Belgian town. She vowed to change her shirt only after the town had surrendered. The siege lasted three years, so people gave the name of the princess to the colour that her shirt had become by the end of her vow.”

The sun was shining fantastically. We caught the glimmer of fishing boats in the distance. The sky and the sea were mixing madly, playing at being sky and sea. We told each other amusing stories which we interrupted with our bursts of laughter, and we repeatedly threw ourselves into the waves. At around nine o’clock, we took the road back to the farm. By the time we arrived, we were really sweaty— our lips salty and our eyes burning. We went down the path to the fresh water; Isa moved along with a tired, languorous walk, which was suffocating me.

Her hips were well arched, her buttocks round and full, and her flawless thighs long and smooth like burnished metal.

The clear spring water cooled my ardor. We went back to the house, a thatched bungalow which was always cool and shaded. It had two rooms surrounded by a spacious verandah: the living room and the bedroom. I saw the unique bed, old-fashioned and incredibly high. Then I caught sight of Isa, taking off her bathing suit, oblivious of me. My body started shaking. My teeth were chattering. I felt a

sort of tightening in my chest; I could hardly breathe. I quickly left the room. She joined me a minute later, dressed in white shorts and a flowered blouse. She was radiant.

I went back into the bedroom to change. I did not see any folding-bed; there was only that nuptial couch in the middle of the room. So I was going to sleep in the bed of an Archduchess of Austria. Perhaps there was a double mattress? No, only a single one. I climbed on the bed and let myself fall back softly. I had to bite on the pillow so I could bear the rush of blood burning my lower abdomen.

I collected myself and rejoined Zaza under the thatched bower where she was preparing breakfast. A pleasant smell of codfish frying in olive oil was rising from the charcoal stove. My aunt was busy removing the seeds from the goat-peppers before throwing them into the noisily crackling pan.

“You must be hungry, my darling. Breakfast will be ready soon. Here’s the menu: salted codfish with hot peppers, fried ripe plantains, avocado slices and eggplants. To drink: home-made punch. Landrun promised to bring fruits for dessert.”

We were seated at the table, tucked into the breakfast, when Landrun came in with a basket full of fruits— oranges, grapefruits, custard apples, purple mombin fruits, and bunches of genip fruits.

“Oh, really, you’re spoiling us,” said Isa.

“This year,” said the old man, “I don’t know what’s wrong with the papayas; they refuse to yield. I know how much you love them.”

“Thank you very much, Landrun. I have a little present for you, too.”

She got up and returned with a red scarf in her hand.

“Thanks ‘a pile’, ‘a pile’, my *commère*. It’s just what I needed to wrap General Brise-Fer in when I take him to the cockfight on Sundays. You’ve chosen the very thing I was thinking of.”

“Is your fighting cock still a champion?”

“Yes, he’s a valiant boy!”

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

We raised our three glasses to the victories of General Brise-Fer.

We spent the rest of the day visiting the farm in the company of the peasant farmer. We stopped at everything to listen to the history of the plants he was growing and to the lives of the animals he was raising.

Laudrun told us as well about the many injustices which the peasants of the region continuously suffered at the hands of the rural guards and big landowners. At the end of the afternoon we returned to the beach. The water was still warm, so we swam a few strokes and then returned to the plateau where the spring had cooled with the coming of dusk. It was already evening, a Haitian Saturday evening sparkling with fires on the hills. Everywhere the sound of tom-toms was harmoniously exploding, and there were cries in the tall trees as the birds were chattering as they readied to sleep. We lit a hurricane lamp and had a plain dinner of fruits, after which we installed ourselves in rocking chairs on the verandah. My aunt asked me questions about my studies. I told her that I was thinking of going on to study medicine after my baccalaureate. She confided to me that one of her sorrows in life was that she had not been able to go to university. She talked to me about her stay in Europe where she had discovered a world completely different from ours. People there, she went on, lived in the twentieth century. It was natural that anyone from Haiti would be speechless at the sight of Paris or London. But the lights of these metropolises were not as innocent as they seemed. At this point Laudrun arrived and interrupted our conversation.

Laudrun was a small, sinewy man. His talk was full of life and light. Although his features were severe, his laughing eyes mocked the rest of his face, especially when he embarked on one of his "tales". As soon as he had settled himself on the verandah, he said:

"Cric..."

"Crac," Aunt Isa and I answered as one.

"Once upon a time," Laudrun started, "there was a young girl who had fallen in love with a river fish. She loved him so much that she spent her life by the water where her lover lived. Her favorite occupation was, naturally, doing the laundry. When she had no clothes to wash, she would remain seated on the bank as though she were endlessly washing the precious cloth of her passion. From time to time, Zin Thézin would point his dazzling fins out of the water to exchange signs with his Lovéna. But the couple did not live only on fresh water and tenderness. Often Lovéna would take off her clothes and dive in the river to join her lover. Zin Thézin would bend his bow in the night of his Lovéna."

“Lovéna’s father, however, was very worried about the young girl’s prolonged absences from the house and one day he hid in a bush near the river, where he soon discovered the intrigue. He refrained from talking to his daughter about this; instead, he resolved to send her to the market several miles away, as often as possible. That way, he would keep her away from the farm. One morning, after Lovéna had left, he went to the river. He had learned by heart the passwords which Lovéna used to tell her prince that he could safely come up. The father began to imitate Lovéna’s voice. He felt a profound hatred for the impudent and reveled in the idea of annihilating him. Soon, Zin rose up over one meter above the stream, bursting with pent up desire. It had been several days since he had disappeared into the pulsing flesh of his mistress. Lovéna’s father gave him one violent blow to the head with his bludgeon. Zin Thézin sank fast. He had said to Lovéna one day that, if ever something bad happened to him, wherever she was at the time, she would be warned by a few drops of blood on the tip of her left breast. At the very moment Zin Thézin was dying at the bottom of the river as suddenly as if he had been struck by lightning, Lovéna, standing in the middle of the market place, discovered that her left breast was bleeding profusely. She dashed toward the river like a mad woman. When she arrived, there was still a large scarlet stain at the place where Zin had been struck. She did not utter a single cry. She went straight to the house and found her father on the threshold.”

“‘Father’, she said, ‘did you kill my fiancé?’”

“‘Aren’t you ashamed, *ti-bouzin*, you hussy, to grant your favours to an animal?’”

“‘Father,’ she interrupted, heaving with rage, ‘I didn’t come to discuss good and evil in the world with you. I want you to answer me yes or no: are you Zin Thézin’s assassin?’”

“‘Yes,’ said the father, ‘with one stroke of my stick I sent your miserable scum of a fish to where he belongs— at the bottom of ...’”

“Before he had time to finish his sentence, the machete chopped across his throat.”

“Lovéna dropped the weapon of patricide and ran back along the path to the river. She sat down on the sun-drenched grass bank and began to sing:

Zin Thézin, my crazy fish, Zin! (twice)

Captain of the water,

My crazy fish, Zin!

Prince of my thighs,

My crazy fish, Zin!

King of my sorrows,

My crazy fish, Zin!

My sole season,

My crazy fish, Zin!

Law of my blood,

My crazy fish, Zin!

My poor love,

My crazy fish, Zin!

Zin Thézin, my crazy fish, Zin!

“Huddled in the bush, Lovéna’s family was despondently watching the scene; the girl’s mellifluous voice was so hauntingly desolate, they could not utter a sound, even less make a move. They were all there— the mother, the brothers, the uncles, the aunts, the grandmother— all bewildered, more motionless than the bush behind which they hid. Lovéna was wildly singing the misfortunes of her fish, her eyes fixed on the river which an indifferent sky had filled. Slowly, without interrupting her farewell dirge, she let herself slip into the current. Even after her disappearance, her voice still soared above the water.”

“Indeed, some people have the gift of hearing it on some evenings; rightly or wrongly, these people believe there is an indestructible link joining the stones, the trees, the fish, and human beings ...”

Laudrun “drew” more tales from the old Haitian *romancero*. But it was the romance of Zin and Lovéna that moved us the most. When we had had our fill of tales, Aunt Isa said to Laudrun: “It’s very late. Time to go to bed. Thank you so much Laudrun for your beautiful stories.”

“Good night to you both,” said the man. “*Good night, compère.*”

THIRD CANTO

Isa preceded me into the bedroom; when I came in she was already in her night gown. I took my clothes off slowly, as if I were removing a sixteenth century suit of armor. When my aunt walked by the lamp to reach the bed, the sheer sight of her intimate shape made me absolutely breathless. For a moment I remained in my pajamas in a corner of the room, waiting for I don't know what.

'Open the window, turn off the light and come to bed now,' she said.

I complied. The sheets were cool and smelled fresh. I was warm and breathing with difficulty.

"Good night, my darling."

"Good night, Aunt Isa."

She fell asleep immediately, but I could not. Gradually my eyes got used to the darkness of the room and one could distinguish the outlines of each object.

Through the window, I saw the trees and a patch of starry sky glimmering overhead. How unfortunate not to have been born a star, a tree, a fish, anything besides this fear benumbed animal lying as I was behind my princess. Little by little I felt her own presence passing into my body; the fantastic transfusion circulated her overflowing blood in my veins. In this way, completely drugged by her, I sank into a deep sleep.

I was awakened by the cool after-midnight breeze blowing from the sea and I turned around to get warm.

"You're cold too?" asked Zaza.

"I'm going to close the window," I replied. "No, we'll need the air. Come close to me." I was in her arms.

I was lost in her arms. I was still alive in the vibrant arms of Zaza.

"Aren't we warm now," she said after a while.

I said nothing. I was not thinking of the act of love, or of anything else, only that I was madly lying on top of Zaza Ramonet.

"You're forgetting I'm your aunt?"

"....."

"Have you ever made love?"

“Yes.”

“With whom?”

“With Nadia.”

“With Nadia? Impossible! Where? When?”

“Last year, at Meyer, during the vacation.”

“Did you make love to her often?”

“Every day, all summer.”

I was not exaggerating.

“And I thought my niece was a virgin, and you a little boy. When did you begin to desire me?”

“On the beach, this morning; in the house, last night; and, to tell you the truth, since always; maybe since I was in the crib, as befits the name Olivier which you chose for me.”

“And I thought you were so well behaved.”

“.....”

“You are my big crazy fish!”

“And your father will kill me with a single blow of a stick!”

We slept until noon and awoke refreshed, with a ferocious hunger. A short while later, we were seated before a breakfast which Laudrun had been kind enough to prepare for us: grilled chicken with peppers, water-boiled ripe plantains, fish fritters, charcoal-baked sweet potatoes, eggplant and tomato salad, rice and red kidney beans cooked in coconut milk and stuffed with bits of salted beef, slices of pineapple and watermelon, and for drinks a mountain punch worthy of our recent soaring heights.

The table was set on the verandah. A warm breeze was blowing from the gulf, but Zaza's white skirt cooled the afternoon. We ate in silence, in quiet delight. Whenever I raised my head from the plate, I rediscovered in the sparkling, iridescently golden eyes of my beloved the wonders of the previous night. After the meal, I helped Isa wash the dishes and then we took an after-dinner stroll.

Before us, the sea was weaving meters of lace in which, at intervals, the mischievousness of the undertow would sprout an enormous flower of foam. Zaza was walking in front of me on the path. Looking at her sensuously undulating before me, I felt a homicidal rage against all those who have discredited the flesh of

woman. Where were they buried, the prophets foaming with premature ejaculation, who invented the lie that the charms of women lead to error and evil? I would dynamite the tombs of those vindictive and barbarous prosecutors who, through the ages, have sought to separate the rhythm of the female body from that of the seasons, of the trees, of the wind, of the rain and the sea.

As Aunt Isa was walking in the afternoon, I was chipping away from my life with cutting strokes the deadly, repugnant myths that have shrouded woman in darkness and humiliation by representing her sex as the most degrading side of human relations. We had reached the edge of the cliff, a spot where a coconut grove stood. We were overlooking the length of the Gulf of Jacmel.

“How about sitting down here,” said Zaza, pointing to a tree trunk.

We sat next to each other. The afternoon was without a wrinkle, as smooth as the sky or the sea, or Zaza’s life to my eyes. In the distance, the fisherman’s boats seemed motionless; flocks of birds were flying in perfect formation, the only motion between the sky and the water. Our memories were gaining room in us; like those seagulls flying to their evening nest, they magnified our joy to the limits of the gulf. Our silence was full of the previous night’s love and of what was yet to come.

The sea extinguished itself, little by little, drawing into its immense shade the boats, the sand, the ridges of the cliff, the sky, the coconuts, and us. A star appeared, followed by thousands of others. We followed the path to the bungalow and once there we dined hastily on goat’s milk and fruit salad.

Alleluia for thee, vibrant pulse of life!

Alleluia for the joyful patience of thy hormones in the night of woman!

I hail thee and offer thee for the veneration of the world! For thy love, I am prepared to cross deserts and virgin forests, to defy stakes and electric chairs, gas chambers and torture rooms! I plant thy seed on the corners of the world’s streets to convert to thy radiance those who see you in shapes of darkness. Thou art neither a star nor a mystic fruit shining over our destiny. Thou art neither a monster, nor a sewer, nor a source of sadness or hell. I am neither thy prophet, nor thy slave, nor thy great macho; I am simply a

fascinated man who, after having experienced thee, declares that thy rhythm follows the same laws that cause the wind to rise, the sun to succeed the night, the moon and the stars, the rain and the snow that fulfil their promises to the sweet harvests of the land! By thee, the unity and solidarity of life endure despite the immense chaos in which the living are immersed.

LAST CANTO

Our intimacy lasted two beautiful years. We managed to meet in the mountain every weekend. Far from suffering from our liaison, my studies rather found wings, and so I was able to reassure my parents. On the days Grandmother accompanied us, I would sleep on a folding bed on the verandah. As the result of an accident which left her with a half-paralyzed leg, Grandmother could not venture down the path which sloped to the beach. So Zaza and I either made love right in the sea, or we would do it on the rocks under the cliffs. Our long absences irritated César (Grandmother Cécilia had been carrying this man's name since the death of Isabelle's father, General César Ramonet, my grandfather, who was shot in the Jacmel mountains during a peasant revolt.) César would throw us suspicious looks whenever she saw us arrive from the beach with sparkling eyes, unsteady moves, in silence and altogether transfigured like trees after a storm. But her suspicion never went beyond a mumbling from her notorious lips. However, we were aware of it and behaved accordingly. In her presence, we avoided all glances, words or gestures that could have betrayed us. I was the well-bred nephew who was keeping company with the pearl among aunts.

As time passed, we were no longer satisfied to wait for our weekly meetings in the mountain. Often, at the end of the afternoon, after school, I would drop by her house on the way home. She was living in the lower part of town, in a villa lost among the trees. To get there, for the last two hundred meters, one went down a narrow street, like a staircase; that was one of the charms of old Jacmel.

Since then, every time I go down the slope of a similar street in a foreign city, I am always, even in the harsh noon light, overwhelmed by the memory of the cool glade where Zaza, marvelously naked, had waited for me. We would succumb to the same ecstasy. We referred to our rendez-vous as my “second philosophy class”, and in that school, on the edge of the evening, one couldn’t tell who was the student and who the teacher.

One windy October evening, as I was poring over a Greek text, a rumor spread to my parents’ home, stepping in like a monster: the Parisian theatre was burning. All Jacmel rushed down to the site of the disaster. When I arrived at the site, the theatre was ablaze dancing in the wind of the Gulf. Isa was nowhere to be seen. Where had she gone? Had she stayed at home? Her name was flying from one person to the next in the crowd. Finally, the town’s idiot announced that he had seen her a few minutes earlier entering the theatre by a side emergency door, saying that she had heard someone cry for help inside. When the fire was under control, a strange, carbonized body was pulled from the furnace; a bracelet helped to identify it as the remains of Zaza Ramonet.

The following afternoon, the town accompanied her remains to the cemetery. During the immense procession, the grieving mouths of those who had loved her called her a queen, a heroine, a wonder. I also saw the bewildered eyes of those who had vainly coveted, defamed, ridiculed her, and who at this moment of her nothingness, did not know how to obtain the forgiveness of this bundle of carbonized bones that she was now, under the mountain of roses. The religious ceremony followed. Old Father Naélo, surrounded by his deacons, his candles and the other displays of sumptuous funerals, pronounced a brief funeral oration.

I could not believe my ears: he revealed that Isabelle Ramonet had been the most generous benefactress of the parish, and that so beautiful was her soul that Saint Phillip and Saint James, Jacmel’s two patron saints, had not been the same ever since they had seen and heard her in Church. He said that her horrible end was simply the disguise in which God had chosen for her to leave this world, and that in her new kingdom she had already found again her splendour—a splendour ceaselessly soothing the swollen hands and feet of the Redeemer, like flowing water in the morning!

When the procession started to cross Jacmel one last time, I noticed the ridiculous eagerness of several men, trying to help carry the coffin that was lighter than an abandoned bird's nest. Suddenly, the earth swallowed it in one bite, along with its flowers. In the evening, which fell early on the living and the dead, there was the return. It was the town's first night without its star. At dinner time, in their homes, people talked only about Zaza: the life she had had, her beauty, her goodness of heart, her refinement, the wind, the fire, the charcoal she had become in order to depart with her theatre.