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Évelyne Trouillot

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The Infamous Rosalie

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Évelyne Trouillot

The Infamous Rosalie

{ Rosalie l'Infâme }

Translated by M. A. Salvodon

Foreword by Edwidge Danticat

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN & LONDON

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In memory of my uncle, Hénock Trouillot,
historian and scholar, whose writings
on everyday life in Saint-Domingue were
an immense help to me . . .

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Foreword

EDWIDGE DANTICAT

History is often written by victors. Perhaps this is why, when discussing Haitian history, we tend to linger more on the battles we've won rather than the ones we lost, the ones where we lost our people, our humanity, ourselves.

Everyone who cares to know is aware that Haiti was the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere, the first place in the world where slaves defeated their masters and started their own nation. However, few people know what it meant for these eventual victors, or their parents and grandparents, to have survived the specific route of the Middle Passage that led to what was once Ayiti, Quisqueya, and which would later become Hispaniola and Saint-Domingue and finally Haiti.

The *Code noir*, that brutal decree passed in 1685 by France's Louis XIV to terrorize those who were in bondage in France's colonies, gives us some idea what life was like for a slave; that and the journals, wills, and sale records of colonists and slave masters. Yet we rarely hear—even in fiction—from ordinary people, such as Lisette, the narrator of this book, about their daily activities, their few joys, and their constant agonies and pain.

The Infamous Rosalie changes that. Embracing a singular and direct, fact-inspired narrative, it shows the individual experiences of ordinary women and men (and even some famous ones) and the scars they bear from the horrors of a then not-so-distant Middle Passage as well as from slavery. One can never know what it is like to make certain choices unless one finds oneself in that very same position under the very same circumstances. This is perhaps why we are not always comfortable discussing situations like the ones so masterfully portrayed in this book. The wounds, though inflicted long ago, are still there. We are still mothers. We are still daughters. We are still men. We are still women. We are still human, no matter how much some would want this not to be true.

In 2005 I had the pleasure of interviewing Évelyne Trouillot for *BOMB* magazine. During a bicentennial conference hosted by the University of the West Indies at its Saint Augustine campus in Trinidad, I heard her talk about how Haitian history is often discussed only in terms of the triumphs of the Haitian Revolution in 1804 and how little attention is paid to what came before that revolution: the pre-Columbian indigenous period, the post-Columbian genocides, the slave trade and colonization period. In our interview I asked her why she thought that was.

“The emphasis was always put on the great figures, the heroes,” she said, “and not on the mass of enslaved and of newly freed slaves. While writing *Rosalie l’Infâme*, I learned about the struggles of the enslaved women, men, and children in their daily lives; their struggles to maintain their dignity. And I truly believe that if the slaves had not fought for their dignity, if they had not managed to maintain some

dignity amid the most inhuman system, the Haitian Revolution would not have been possible. While doing my research for writing *Rosalie*, I could empathize with them because finally I saw them as human beings and not as an anonymous mass of victims of slavery.”

I am so glad to see Évelyne Trouillot’s powerful novel translated into English by the equally talented Marjorie Salvodon. Now a whole new group of readers can participate in this growing shattering of silences around these increasingly less anonymous voices of the ultimate *victors* over slavery.

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank Évelyne Trouillot for writing a novel that highlights the significant role of the women who resisted slavery in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue and for answering all my questions with grace, intelligence, and promptness.

I am thankful for the invaluable comments made by the anonymous readers at the University of Nebraska Press on the first draft of the manuscript and for the meticulous and insightful review of successive drafts of this translation by Laura Pirott-Quintero, Michael Reder, and Faith Smith. I appreciate the travel grant I received from Suffolk University's Faculty Development Committee, which enabled me to travel to Haiti in 2011, and thank the College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Office, whose research funds enabled Sandy Germain to work on this project as my research assistant.

As always, the support of my family and friends in Haiti, France, and the United States inspires me to be attentive to words and their various contexts, whether in English, French, Spanish, or Haitian. I want to extend a special thank-you to Mark Schafer for his generosity, his skills as a wordsmith, and his thorough review of a previous draft of this translation. May we continue to swim together in the sea of languages!

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I WEAVE THROUGH THE MAZE OF paths between the shacks, taking care to go the back way, avoiding the one window through which I can glimpse the dark, damp rooms inside the house. My blue serge skirt swirls around my legs, and I hold it up with one hand to keep it out of the puddles from yesterday's rain. I run, ignoring the occasional scolding looks and grumblings that follow me, responding to well-meaning advice with a flick of my hand.

"Hurry up, Lisette, or you'll be in trouble with your mistress!"

"The food is ready, Lisette. What are you doing out here?"

My legs seem possessed by an incredible speed, never hesitating as they follow the path between the shacks without faltering—as if they were skimming the surface of the stones, raising the fine dust brightened by the noonday sun. I don't see anything as I run. The screams of Paladin's children as their father was burned at the stake on the Beauplan plantation still resound beneath my skin. The master had commanded all Negroes to bring something to stoke the fire with and to watch the spectacle. Slipping into the

crowd, I saw Paladin's two daughters, Lolotte and Marinette, watching their father stamp his feet and shriek.

"Vile, godless scoundrel, unworthy of being counted among men, crueler than the wild beasts . . .

"For attempting to murder your fellow men and employing underhanded and shameful means to destroy your master's house and endanger the goods bestowed upon him by divine Providence, the atrocity of your crime merits death and every kind of torment. But because the Holy Church does not refuse he who is willing to repent and rectify his errant ways . . ."

Beauplan had prepared things well. The beadle was there, prayer book in hand, to lend a sacrosanct atmosphere to the execution. The prayer damning the poisoners rose above the screams of the two girls, making the scene unreal. Everyone was sweating, and I realize I'd been balancing on the tips of my toes when the woman next to me punched me in the ribs. My tears began to flow, but I continued watching the madness of the flames in spite of myself. The charred skin stuck to my pupils, darkening the depths of my soul. Before my eyes a human body turned to ashes.

"Lisette, we're waiting for you in the big house. Where did you go?"

I inhabit the final spasms of Paladin, whose face, before it was turned into a mask of horror by the sizzling stake, I'm unable to reconstruct. I inhabit the fingers of this same man as he plucks the strings of his *banza* on a night of *calendas*, with the music enchanting us. I inhabit the streaks that disfigure him, from his shoulder to his ribs, long tracks of raised welts swollen with memories of the hot branding irons, and their imprints, of belonging and suffering. I in-

habit the *chica*, dancing under the bower, prisoner of the advancing hour and the stars that herald the end of our illusory freedom. I am the wind, tethered to the ground.

I speed past Ma Victor's shack, turn left at Mam'zelle Jeanne's shack, then run all the way to the big house. I reach the back door just as Ma Augustine is coming out. She looks exasperated.

"At last, Lisette! Where have you been? Madame is about to sit down to eat."

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

I quickly rinse my face, wash my hands and feet, shake out my skirt, and smooth my wrinkled blouse. Grumbling the whole time, Ma Victor pours sauces into small earthenware bowls. Ma Augustine, my godmother, hangs a clean apron around my neck, and I walk into the dining room ahead of her. A minute later my mistress, Madame Clémentine Fayot, enters the room in a swish of silk and lace.

I've grown skilled in the art of averting my eyes. As I peek through the lace my mistress wears around her wrists, neck, skirts, and slips, I cast a glance, half-complicit, half-suspicious, at Gracieuse—the cocotte, who hopes that the favors she provides her masters will one day gain her her freedom. Cocotte, dear cocotte, say my laughing eyes as my body plays out this charade, this servile comedy, trying to avoid any trouble that my excessive absence may have provoked; my arms dangle innocently at my hips, my neck grows shorter, and my buttocks contract. Gracieuse isn't fooled by my submissive posture. Like a true Congo woman, she sways her hips as she follows her mistress; her smile exposes my subterfuge.

"Where did you go, you little stupid thing, that your

breath stinks of hate? Won't you ever understand that the sun, even when it sets on the sea, never gets wet?"

Gracieuse carries the bamboo fan regally. Every movement of her hand transmits a message full of wet kisses, sweet and languorous caresses, forbidden whisperings, delectable pleasures. Madame lets herself fall voluptuously into her chair, while Monsieur seems unable to take his eyes off Gracieuse's arms; her own eyes are half-shut. Hypnotized by her suggestive, lascivious gestures, the slow, smooth, to-and-fro of the fan, and her heavy, coaxing eyes, my masters seem uninterested in me for the moment.

"Don't meddle in the business of the master and his cocotte. Things aren't as simple as you think." That's what Augustine often says when I complain about the privileges Gracieuse enjoys, especially ever since the departure of Mademoiselle Sarah, the master and mistress's daughter.

"I'm Sarah's Negress," I said one day long ago, when Grandma Charlotte was still alive. Back in our shack, she slapped me in the face. "I don't want you ever to think that thought again, Lisette. Arada women belong to no one."

I have a long history with beatings, enough to know them well and to mistrust them. Even in my privileged position working for Mademoiselle Sarah, I was never protected. Sarah herself, despite having been forbidden from hitting me, couldn't always control herself and sometimes did. Or she would invent stories of broken toys, beheaded dolls, or soiled slips to wield the power she held. A young Creole girl born to well-heeled planters, she had tutors, dance and music instructors, and regularly received sweetmeats from France. Ten, twenty, even fifty lashes for the worse offenses—the whip and I share a long history of blows and eva-

sions, of crashes and missed encounters. From tears to screams, from moans to silences, I have mastered the entire expressive range of my voice to spare my skin. The whip's traces aren't visible: they've lodged in the hollow of my hand, and I feel as if my guts are dragging under my feet, though no one can see them. But on that long ago day, when Grandma Charlotte was still alive, the slap of her hand left its mark on my cheek. It gathered the pitfalls of my hidden desperation: the scattered bits and pieces of shame, the urge to express my anger and the morsels of my tears and my betrayal, and it wove them all together in a single brusque movement more powerful than the whip. I still feel the sharp stinging sound coursing through me, her disdain for my unease and fear, her lack of pity for my bowing and scraping. I rest on the wings of that gesture whenever my knees refuse to bend to refresh my pupils in the darkness of their truth.

I begin to serve the meal. First, the aperitif, which must be removed from the small, locked cabinet. Then I spoon a bit of each dish on the plate of Ma Victor's great-niece, Manon. Standing next to the large mahogany dresser, a few steps away from my mistress, Manon tastes every dish at every meal. When it seems like she's survived the meal, I serve Monsieur and Madame and their guests, if there are any. Without saying a word, with a curtsy befitting her eight years, the young girl then joins the other slaves in the kitchen.

We are in the midst of a reign of terror that is convulsing the northern part of the Big Island. Blacks and whites, slaves and masters alike, everybody trembles with fear, barely daring to touch the food they are served. Men spy on their

women and mistresses. Mothers look suspiciously at their lovers and neighbors. The dreaded fear of poison has invaded every residence, breeding utter confusion and mistrust. From large to small shacks, from one alley to the next, everyone distrusts everyone else. A month doesn't go by without four or five men or women being burned, accused of having poisoned Negroes or whites. Paladin is just one more entry on a long list of names.

For a while now that's all the Fayots talk about at the dinner table. The guests seem to be in a competition to tell stories of Negro poisoners, of a valet who killed his long-time protector, of a mulatto woman who got rid of her master to obtain the freedom he had promised her more quickly, of slaves killing themselves to escape slavery. The colonists are fascinated by these incidents, which they repeat to one another in whispers. They lower their voices noticeably every time Rose-Marie, broom or rag in hand, walks down the corridor. They look up with irritation whenever Florville comes to bother the master for this or that emergency, but they speak freely in front of me and Gracieuse, Madame's cocotte. Am I not Lisette, granddaughter of Charlotte, an Arada woman who was the house cook until she died of smallpox? Ma Augustine had always been responsible for the housekeeping, supervising Rose-Marie and the slave children. Even though Ma Victor took Grandma Charlotte's place, the masters don't trust her entirely. Master Fayot calculated that she'd think twice before risking the life of her great-niece, even if she wanted to poison the Fayot family. That's why Manon eats before the masters do every day. I wonder if she understands that on any given day a mouthful could cause her great suffering

and death. Yet Manon is the daughter of Franchette, who was Madame's cocotte for years, before Gracieuse. Madame Fayot always said that with Franchette's fingers combing their hair, she and her daughter were sure to be among the most elegantly dressed women in town. Franchette died in labor, and since then Ma Victor has taken care of the child. Ma Augustine was not surprised by Madame's actions: "Believe me, Lisette, don't try to understand these Creole women. They caress you in the morning and have you whipped at night."

Dwelling within me is my true vision, the one that refuses all servility, that glides over the damask tablecloth, Madame's gold jewelry, the bottles of wine picked off crates just unloaded from Bordeaux, the patios filled with flowers, the clipped hedges that were my hiding place and refuge since Grandma Charlotte's time, the broad roads, the fields of sugarcane, the bare-chested Negroes in short britches, the workrooms, the Negroes' gardens that extended all the way to the mountains—all the way to the hills that surround us, so close, so far. My movements are mechanical: I set the dishes Ma Augustine hands me on the table, I remove the empty plates, I fill the empty glasses. I barely eat, so I can be free during the nap my master and mistress take. The cocotte will keep them company. The departure of Mademoiselle Sarah gave me greater freedom of movement, since the master and mistress only think of me at mealtimes, when the heat is oppressive, or when company arrives and there are large dinners followed by dances, which the mistress loves to organize. As long as there are enough maids to slap around, the master and mistress don't pay attention to eve-

ry little thing we do! I scrub the saucepans, the *couis*, the calabashes Jeannine rinses with water then turns over to dry in the basket. As the oldest of the slaves working as maids in the house, Ma Augustine supervises cleaning and cooking. She doesn't let me leave until I've finished my chores, and honestly, it never would have occurred to me to do that. The only thing that betrays my haste to leave is the speed and dexterity of my hands.

"Don't be too eager to glimpse the sun's rays, my child. The sun can also announce that rain is on the way."

No, I won't question your wise words, Ma Augustine. There are moments when life doesn't let patience or reason interfere but swirls around the pebbles on life's road, the bee's sting and the foolishness of the wind.

"Hey Lisette!" Fontilus, the son of Gentilus the baker, calls to me as I pass by him in a flash. "Did you poison anyone today? Can we eat now?"

I shoot back my answer in the same mocking tone, without even turning to look at him.

"Watch out, Fontilus! On the Lalanne plantation the baker was accused of poisoning the flour. Tell your father to watch out."

"Stop it, you two," Ma Victor orders. She's sitting in front of a basket full of unshelled peas, with Manon beside her. "It's no joke."

Fontilus and I both laugh with the same, slightly hopeless delirium, as I keep going, feeling his gaze lingering on my buttocks.

"You're tall and have the large buttocks of women of our race," Ma Augustine told me. "You're as beautiful as your

great-aunt Brigitte.” She says I’m a Creole, born on the Big Island, and that I carry within me all the gestures of the Arada race, the race of my mother. Fontilus says that the tinge of yellow in my skin reminds him of nearly ripe mangoes, which explains why I have such a wholesome character. “You’re not ripe yet,” he tells me. Fontilus teases me to no end, but one day I overhear him saying that his thighs dance the *chica* with delight when he sees me pass by.

Ma Victor, always ready to speak her mind on the subject of Negroes, states that Congo men like Fontilus have two faults: they think with that thing between their legs, and they get way too much pleasure from drinking brandy and fighting. Arada women, on the other hand, often have the power to predict the future.

Regarding the future, I just want to be certain of my next meeting with Vincent. I stay away from the workrooms, the damp-walled *ajoupas** belonging to the field slaves, and the smell of droppings from men and animals that clings to the trees and clouds. I take off, imitating the movement of leaves bursting with nostalgia and exuberance, like despairing petals. My braids swell under the weight of the raindrops that run down my back. When the rain stops, I notice I’ve been crying for a while, that my eyelids—possessed by the image of the burning stake—counter my good-natured thoughts.

Suddenly Vincent is standing there, solid and sure, full of the brown, rocky earth in which I bury my tears. Everything comes out: the flames, the screams, the fear, the anguish, the

* Hastily assembled, tall huts covered with leaves.

shame, the indignation, the anger and the rage. I let my fingers reacquaint themselves with his arms—those mysterious lianas, strengthened by every marking and brand on his chest. Beneath the burns he took on of his own volition, I rediscover again the stamp of the inhuman trade, marking much more than his skin. I greet them again. I run my fingers and lips over his skin for a long time, let my tongue find refuge there, seeking tenderness and freedom. Vincent's large hands take stock of the different parts of my body as well, rediscovering my breath, my nightmares, my braids pinned against my ears, my doubts, my hips, my breasts.

“Where is your *garde-corps*,* Lisette?”

Ma Augustine had made me take off the talisman I always wore, the one Grandma Charlotte gave me. I would wear it inside my blouse, against my chest. It was a way to remember Grandma Charlotte and the mother I never knew.

Ma Augustine commanded, “Burn it, hide it far from here, throw it in the river, but don't have it on you. They hang people for less than that. Negroes are forbidden from wearing these talismans.”

As I made my way toward the rear of the shack I shared with her, Ma Augustine added, “Get rid of your aunt Brigitte's cord as well.”

“Why?” I stuttered, but my godmother's inscrutable face silenced my protests.

That day I took the piece of cord with its many knots that had belonged to my great-aunt Brigitte, Charlotte's

* The *garde-corps* was a kind of talisman worn by rebellious slaves that was said to make them invulnerable to firearms and release them from the fear of whites.

sister, from the calabash where I kept my *rassade* drop earrings, my burned spelling book, the piece of white lace I had taken from one of Mademoiselle Sarah's blouses, and the small golden jewel I have no right to wear. I removed my talisman made of rooster feathers, sand from an hour-glass, and leather and went to place my treasure at the very top of the mango tree, behind the shacks, deep in a hollow I'd discovered long ago. I couldn't bring myself to destroy them. I already felt too vulnerable, as if an important part of me had been torn away. Yet it never occurred to me to disobey Ma Augustine.

"I'm leaving you in your godmother's care," Grandma Charlotte had told me before she died. "She's a ship sister, an Arada woman like us. She knew your great-aunt Brigitte well."

The name of my great-aunt is itself a talisman, as powerful as the one she gave me. I hang onto it in moments of despair, when I'm about to succumb to my sinking morale.

"Brigitte was so beautiful and still young when I knew her," Ma Augustine had told me. "Her two sons died trying to protect her. Two young boys killed in front of their mother as well as their aunt Charlotte, your grandmother. But Brigitte always smiled when she spoke of them, for she could not have borne to see them enslaved. 'Better dead than slaves,' she would often say. And her voice, so proud, gave us back our strength and dignity."

"We must trust both grandmas," Vincent says, accepting Ma Augustine's decision immediately, without ever having met her. "They know many things."

Until those happy moments when we're together again, the violence and horror trouble us deeply. Vincent talks about

the recent arrival of slave ships, the new Maroons who have escaped and joined his group, the raids by the constabulary, now more determined than ever to capture them, the Maroons' visits to the plantations to get two Nago women who wanted to join their men, the loss of three companions, dismembered after being captured. Only my fingers show the fear I feel for my man: they tremble on his shoulders, on his hair tied back in a ponytail that brushes his neck, in his coarse and abundant beard. I shudder, but I silence my fears and tell him about the fear of poison that has traveled the length and breadth of the plantations, the measures taken by the colonists, the men and women who have been tortured and burned.

His face tenses slightly, but his voice doesn't waver. "The whites don't seem to understand that the danger will take different paths but that each path will intersect with the others in good time."

We're asleep under the shade of a large poisonwood tree, from which Vincent can survey the surrounding area. He places his hand on my sex and holds it there soft and still, like a serene, sure comfort. I fall asleep amid the beauty of this land that seems to bear the mark of our pain—Creoles, Aradas, Congos, Nagos, Ibos, newly arrived Negroes, forever *bossales*,* confronting our chains. In my sleep I struggle against miasmas and stagnant waters, barracoons and the steerage of ships, the growl of dogs, bodies too hot and damp, the sound of bludgeons.

Vincent's mischievous finger wakes me, and soon we are

* Slaves who had recently arrived in the colony, as opposed to "Creoles," who were men and women born in the colony, whether of African or European heritage.

swept up in a tumult of movement and maddening words. Our laughter stops abruptly as we let our passion consume our hidden fear and anguish.

“You have to go back, Lisette.”

“Yes, I know. Actually, I promised Michaud I’d stop by and see him this afternoon.”

As usual, Vincent stands to watch me leave. I almost always look over my shoulders at the last mountain slope where the hills hide him from me completely, as if once again he’s disappeared into the bark of a tree or the bend of a stone wall. When will I see him again? When will I get the next sign telling me whether it will be in one day, three weeks, or two months? I ask the Good Lord to protect him. Luckily, my man was able to keep his talismans and his knife. I don’t dare think about what would happen to him if he were captured—or rather, I imagine all too well the atrocities to which he would be subjected. Maroons have severed legs and ears, burned genitals, chained feet; they are cast aside to be sold with missing body parts, maimed and half-dead, when they’re not devoured by mastiffs.

Sometimes I tell myself that it’s too risky for Vincent to come see me, even if the Fayot plantation is miles away and no one knows about us. But I’m never able to bring up my reservations when I see him. From that moment on, all of my senses are focused on endlessly multiplying the movement of his hands, the sounds of his desire, the power of his pleasure, the tenderness of his eyes, the tickle of his beard on my chest, the frenzy of his sex against mine.

“I need you,” he told me one day when my eyes were more bewildered than usual. His former master had just posted a new broadside calling for his capture.

Please return Vincent, a runaway slave known as The Fearless One, a Nago Negro, age approximately twenty-four years, novice coachman, good knowledge of French, sometimes passes for a free man, escaped nine years ago.

“May your fear be as strong as your anger, my love. You and freedom both relish the rising sun and mother’s milk. Your love makes me want to look at the sky.”

My feet brought me home just as swiftly. Before reaching the workrooms, I turn right and stop when I come to a small shack in the middle of a yard. I always slow down when I get here, as if remembering the slaves discarded by the master weighs down my every step. All the people who can no longer work: Désirée, a sixty-year-old Mina Negress who walks with difficulty because of the burns on her legs and thighs; Pierrot, a Congo Negro, who had pox three years ago and now carries his distress on his ravaged face; Clarens, Rosalie’s baby, who was born hunchback and is barely learning to walk; Charlot, a short, newly arrived Negro who was already disabled when he got off the boat and was discarded from the beginning, who cultivates the vegetable garden with the help of Victor, Ma Victor’s oldest son—Charlot, who must be about sixteen but acts like a child. And of course, Michaud the former overseer, who lost his arm as a result of an accident. They all come running over when they see me. It’s always like this when someone visits these neglected people. I give the children, including Victor, macaroons that I took from the small cupboard. For the others I’ve brought boiled ripe bananas; they are cold and soft but sweet. Michaud gives his to Désirée. The old woman soon moves away, mumbling incompre-

hensibly. Between her tears and sobs she repeats a litany, from which Michaud can sometimes make out a few words. From time to time tears fall slowly from her eyes, as if she were tired of crying but couldn't help herself. Michaud signals me to stop when I start to move in her direction.

Michaud tries to translate what Désirée says, but his knowledge of Bambara is limited. As a former overseer, he manages to identify the languages of most of the slaves, classifying them rapidly: Mandingo, Wolof, Nago, Mina, Hausa, Ibo, Arada.

“I was head overseer for ten years,” he told me one day, “and I can assure you that each of these nations carries its scars not only on their bodies and faces but in its people's gait, in the cadence of their words, in their ways of resisting slavery. But I've never placed labels on the nations like the whites do, calling them sly, brawler, cannibal, or chicken thief. I hit everyone just as hard, never looking at the bent backs, never paying attention to the moans, never showing that I was afraid of their hateful, angry glances, never hesitating or being moved to pity them for the torture the master demanded. This work had to be done, and I did it.”

The silence between us alternatively soothes and reopens our wounds. Michaud never speaks of the two attempts to poison him, of the suicide of the Ibo woman who lived with him, of his accident, which happened under more than suspicious circumstances. He is the only one who knows of my relationship with Vincent, a Maroon known as the Fearless One. He knows I know about his role as a messenger, that he is an intermediary for slaves who want to run away, find shelter, and not get captured. But today the news of Pala-

din's horrific death must have finally made it to the shack, reaching those slaves who no longer can work, for Michaud's voice pours out like cloudy brandy. I don't like the tremors that fill his eyes with pain and the stammering that pulses beneath his skin. I put my hand on his right arm, the one that still fills his sleeve and knocks against his thighs in despairing spasms.

"It must be the weather," I tell him, pointing at the overcast sky. "You know how rain makes your bones tingle."

Michaud doesn't respond right away. I hand him two copies of *L'Affiche Américaine* that I was able to steal without the master's knowledge, but Michaud looks uninterested.

"It's true we can read, you and I," he says with a tone so bitter that, despite myself, I open my mouth to protest, but he doesn't let me speak.

"You think that having taken the risk of teaching other slaves to read makes us any less privileged?"

Michaud's words drench my remorse, which is always ready to overcome any impulse toward fervor by negating it with despair. I choke back all my distress, the unshed tears that flowed within me during the days of cotton and chifon, at nap time in Mademoiselle Sarah's room while the sun beat high and heavy on the backs of those in the fields, during the warm nights spent at the foot of Mademoiselle Sarah's bed while the cool air made others shiver, despite the sealed windows of the wooden shacks.

"I silence the wounds inflicted by a thousand slaps given with such natural ease, received a thousand times with such apparent submission, that one wonders if they will always be a part of life. I won't mention the weight of the forced

smiles, drawing out our dignity until it stiffens. No, I say nothing about this because the scale that can counterbalance shame does not exist.

“It’s funny,” Michaud continues, his eyes suddenly veiled, “but I can’t remember what my life was like when I had two arms. It seems that I only began to act when this one was gone, when I felt the weight of a falling arm, chopped off, still alive, bleeding and jolting. I know the slaves talk about it on the plantation. Me, I never said anything. Today Lisette, let me tell you the story of the arm I no longer have.”

I hardly dared to breathe as I waited for Michaud to continue, my eyes fixed on his fairly calm face.

“That was the day,” he said, “they brought back Arcinte, a Nago woman who had already tried to escape once; the coachman had caught her and taken her back to the master Fayot. He isn’t meaner than anyone else, but maybe he had slept badly or dreamed of Negroes’ blood the night before. I know that at the time he was chasing Josette, a freedwoman, a seamstress on Rue 10, who only had eyes for her man, Ti Jean. You know how the master goes crazy over a well-rounded, small woman.”

Gracieuse’s small, round silhouette closing the door to the master’s large room weaves into my memory, and I nod my head to tell Michaud I know what he’s talking about. This penchant of the master’s had kept me out of his indiscreet hands. Too bad his son didn’t share his father’s tastes

...

My mind turns this page quickly, and I let Michaud’s words continue their long pilgrimage.

“I think,” he said, “she would have preferred that they branded her again and cut off an ear, like they did the first

time. But the master ordered fifty lashes of the *rigoise** for Arcinte, twenty-nine as stipulated in their *Code noir* and twenty-one more to dissuade her from giving in to the desire to run away a third time. She was seven months pregnant, and I knew that she'd had two miscarriages already. She was about thirty years old, calm and determined, never a complaint from her. She carried her dreams in her eyes. A dream made up of two branches closely intertwined: to have a child and to be free. Her last attempt at escaping had cost her not only an ear but her child as well. She had the marks of the mastiffs' bites on her calves. Her baby's father had escaped, and obviously she wanted to join him. But I think her need for freedom was not linked to any man; in slavery she simply could not breathe. The master ignored my suggestion that he give her a different punishment. They had undressed the woman already, dug a hole big enough to accommodate her naked belly. When they had placed her against the ground, her naked buttocks exposed, Arcinte let out a cry that begged for madness to destroy her.”

Once again, Michaud stops, and I see his lips tense. Powerless, I can only wait for him to find the strength to continue.

“You see, Lisette, if she had gone completely mad, I would have said that she had not understood, that in her confusion she had seen herself as a bird of paradise with her son on her wings and a flower in her beak. But her cry cast over me a chill reminiscent of early-morning mist. I knew that every fiber of her being was weeping for her lost child.

* A whip made of woven straps of leather invented to discipline slaves working on plantations.

Her child was already a slave and punished before birth, forever marked by the whip of the overseer—my whip!—I, the one who daily beat, whipped, and punished. Don't ask me how I could do it because to this day I wonder if it wasn't my guardian angel who dealt the blow. Don't tell anyone that I think I used the machete that I always kept by my side because I will deny it. My left wrist fell neatly and evenly. I felt the pain lodged at the tip of my five remaining fingers. I don't know what the master or the others did with all the blood and that member that no longer belongs to me.

“I muster my strength and turn to look at Arcinte, who gets up and goes. She is no longer naked, someone must have given her a shirt, beneath which her buttocks protrude, devoid of any sexuality. She leaves, shaking as she silently sobs, leaning on two other women who carry her more than lead her away. Then, relieved, I close my eyes, and beneath my pupils used to seeing hidden smiles, I see Arcinte, a free, elongated silhouette moving toward the hills, her son in her arms, without chains or bites, infinitely female in the beauty of her sex. The pain in me dances a frenetic and merciless *congo*, and I let myself go.”

Michaud pauses for a brief moment, and I see from his serene gaze that he has gone to the free spaces occupied by Arcinte. He smiles before continuing. “To explain this accident, people spoke of vengeful gods, of vodun, of punishment deserved. After that the master cast me on this dump with all the others deemed useless . . . It's been three years now.”

Between us silence covers the wounds with a veil of peace and a soft breeze. Michaud's right hand seems very heavy

to me today. Grandma Charlotte's memory weighs on me. I remember her words from long ago telling me about her capture, the time in the barracoons, when she was sold and burned. After each of our encounters filled with love and pain, she would tell me: "Your story must dwell, vigilant, under your skin, at the tips of your hair. Each piece that you add to it grows roots and stars for your dreams."

Michaud's tale glides over me and joins all the other pieces of stories around and inside me, leaving me both satisfied and infinitely sad.