

## I. RARA AND MÉMÉ

An ardent red sun is sinking in the orange sky. In shadowy lairs, life wakes up and springs forth.

With brief lengthening bounds a band of kangaroos races down to the river. As it passes by, Tiparu the armadillo rolls up in his carapace and Kiwi, the flightless bird, emerges momentarily from his vague dream. Between the forked mango-trees, beneath the crows of the giant acacias, flying squirrels deploy their parachutes, launch forth and chase one another with shrill whistles. Immense flowers with variegated corollas embalm the atmosphere, some of them fluttering into the air: emerald, ruby and sapphire butterflies. Multicolored parrots chatter hectically.

Above the surface of the water peep the blue-green eyes and spoon-like beaks of water-moles. Pippi-kuink is in a fearful mood. As if he were conscious of his own strangeness he hides his frolics, his games and his amours.

Neither duck nor rat I deign to be,  
I lay eggs have hair, a beak, four paws,  
In the soft mud I plead my cause,  
I amaze all and all amaze me.

Modest and awkward, the ornithorhynchi<sup>1</sup> emerge one by one from the reeds, their tails quivering, encouraging one another, conscientiously dragging their little bellies over the sand.

Two bursts of laughter frighten them. They swerve, capsize, stumble, get up again, limping furiously toward the protective water. Terror! Two giants bar their way. Already reassured, however, they pause. They raise themselves up on their hind legs, agitating their forepaws, sniffing and hissing, overwhelming Rara and Mémé with amicable but slightly undignified quacking sounds.

Slender statuettes, the two children are hand in hand. Light phormium loincloths scarcely cover their arched hips. Their bare limbs, the color of ripe apricot, have the flexibility of young wild beasts. Necklaces of red pandanus seeds and sea-shells hang down over their bronzed torsos, where blue designs, carefully tattooed, inscribe the nobility of their origin. Other complex blue webs ornament their foreheads and cheeks. Crowns of white flowers are posed on their shocks of black hair. A puerile gaiety sparkles in their symmetrical features, and from their delicately-shaped lips, between sharp white teeth, flows the most beautiful youthful and inextinguishable laughter.

With his harpoon, made with a sharp stone solidly encased in a straight stem, Rara scratches the sand in front of the most adventurous of the amphibians, which understands the game and tries madly to grab it. Already, however, the rest of the band is jostling around Mémé, who is sitting down. In a broad latanier leaf she has brought a provision of snails, slugs and mud-worms, and is distributing them. From time to time she pauses, teases them, pretending to bargain; they nibble her angrily, sitting up on their backsides, protesting with hectic hissing sounds. Then, once again, their beak-like mouths extended, clapping desirously, they consume the food greedily.

In water and on land, Pippi-kuink run, run.  
In water and on land, Pippi-kuink guzzle, guzzle.

In the battle for the provender, the less nimble lose their equilibrium, falling on their backs. There are frenetic wriggings, which extract further laughter from the children. The stout Pippi, the father of the tribe, squanders thrusts of his hips in vain trying to regain his stance. Rara tickles his belly with the tip of his harpoon. The offended Pippi bites the stem, choking with rage. Around him, his offspring complain noisily to the gods.

Finally, Mémé's bare foot comes to the patriarch's aid. He completes his reestablishment and draws away, very dignified, wagging his tail. All his fellows follow him. Mémé's hands are empty, in any case. The unexpected fall of a calabash hastens the stampede. In the crown of a coconut-palm, white-maned monkeys are carefully stripping the nuts and peppering the runaways with the peel.

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<sup>1</sup> The ornithorhynchus is nowadays better known as the duck-billed platypus.

Hand-in-hand once again, Rara and Mémé, a song on their lips, walk along the stream. Its flow is clear and noisy, between banks covered in medeoloides lilies. Under their feet, water-snakes and tiny turtles swarm. Fantastic tree-ferns, clumps of mulberries and guavas frame them with their prodigious verdure. Sleek blue dragonflies glide over the water, brushing them and taking flight.

Gradually, the foliage thins out and becomes stunted. The waves hasten, breaking and foaming. There is a barrier of rocks through which, in the distant past, the waters laboriously scoured a passage. The broken flanks of the cliff are ablaze with red orpiment and the ardent greens of malachite. The children are up to their knees in water.

Between their calves, among the large gray shrimp, are the golden and steely flashes of fish.

The gorge narrows. The torrent rumbles more deafeningly. There is a chilly odor. In the shadows, glittering stones alternate with holes full of darkness. Here and there, in the fissures, bats are mewling. A cavern yawns, in which colossal bones are whitening. Piously, Rara raises his fingers to his lips, and salutes with his open palm the remains of the giant birds that were kings before the humans, and whose spirits it is appropriate to appease. Mémé reproduces exactly the same gestures.

The gorge is already broadening out again. A sheet of orange sky is revealed, and also, high up, the bleakness of the basalt, on which a mast is erected. A striped flag is fluttering there.

While continuing to paddle, Rara and Mémé honor the divine sign, and sing their tribute:

The livid gods are feared by the light of day,  
The water spat them out and took them away.  
They will come back from the distant blue;  
Where their feet once trod, the earth is taboo.

Above the chant of their childish lips, however, rises the murmurous growl of the sea. The last expanses of the wall crumble. Liberated, the stream spreads out nonchalantly over the golden sand, where it is united with the caressing waves.

The virgin wind, which nothing except for vast albatrosses and gigantic frigate birds has breathed in for thousands of kilometers, blows over bronzed faces. A wide open bay is limited by two rocky points. To the left, in the background, a peak is outlined, surmounted by a thick column of smoke. Rara's index-finger points to it.

"The spirit of Hakarou is agitated."

"May Hakarou be blessed," Mémé replies.

The black heads of coral protrude here and there from the steep shoreline. Beyond the most distant, a brown islet, unexpectedly emerged, launches two waterspouts toward the sky and sinks, leaving behind a wake of foam.

The children shout, in chorus:

Good hunting to you, Harka the whale  
Good hunting to you, thank you for your gift.  
To us of your scraps, Harka the whale,  
Good hunting to you, spit out your spindrift.

When Harka idles close to the shore, the fish take fright and are abundant on the reef—but the tide is still too high. The children sit down on the golden sand, amid the wrack, the coral debris and the shells. Mémé curls up against Rara's side, leans her head on his shoulder and says, coaxingly: "Tell the story of things again."

And Rara, having stuck his harpoon in the sand, condescendingly intones the Polynesian genesis.

The tradition is deposited in Mémé's mind exactly as it is in his, but in order that the revered images that come from the ancestors shall not be effaced, it is good that the words, hymned according to the rituals, should project them into the light. From the boy's lips spring formulas inculcated by the sages. Mémé accompanies them with gestures, finishes the sentences or repeats the conclusions as a chorus. It is a cantilena for two voices that are only one, since Rara and Mémé are only two halves of Raramémé.

Once, there was Atua, the Eternal Night.<sup>2</sup> But Rahuo became bored, and, from the soft and diffuse Entity, by means of the great fish-hook, pulled out Oaleya, the fortunate island. He seated it solidly in the waters, set plants upon it, filled it with animals and pinned the sun and moon in the sky to illuminate it. In the beginning, their movements were hasty and disordered, but the subtle Mawi fixed them with the jawbone of his grandfather, in such a way that thereafter, the sun, as it went down, caused the moon to rise, and their march became slow and regular.

Higher up is placed the reservoir of the rains, and higher still the winds. Even higher are the redoubtable spirits, after that the light, and then the ultimate sky, in which Rahuo, king of the gods, is resident.

Rara pauses. Golden sand runs through his brown fingers. Mémé articulates the response: “But the gods are everywhere.”

Rara nods his chin, throws back his head and resumes.

The gods are everywhere. They fill the earth, and that which is underneath, and the waters, and the skies. Some are visible, others invisible. Some are good and others evil. The wise know words that attract them, repel them, conciliate them, constrain them, or even kill them. Killing them all would be the safest thing, but that cannot be done; so it is necessary to charm them with incantations and appease them with sacrifices.

Among all the islands with which Rahuo’s whim has strewn the great water, Oaleya is the most privileged, but there are three others almost as spacious, or four, or perhaps ten; bold minds think that there might even be more, but that is improbable. Oaleya shines by comparison with them like the sun by comparison with the palest of the stars. So, in great pirogues, the chiefs brought all the superb Oyas there: men and women, the people of the crab, the people of the armadillo, the people of the kangaroo and the people of the octopus...

Outside of Oaleya the Fortunate, where the Oyas are, only miserable tribes exist, half-human, half-animal, without blazons, clinging to their reefs as best they can, like limpets.

From the soft Entity that surrounds everything that is, anything might surge. All kinds of apparitions emerge therefrom, to be reabsorbed again. There are famous ones that sometimes possess human form, the pallor of the surf, the mastery of the lightning and the most disconcerting magic. Their coming presages great cataclysms, which it is appropriate to welcome with resignation, for they are unavoidable, and they pass. Everything about them is taboo, including their slightest signs and traces. Toward the mast that dominates the bluff—where the blue, red and dirty white flutter—four thin bronze arms are raised, and childish voice shout:

Fear the livid gods who bring dismay  
The water spat them out and took them away.  
They will come back from the distant blue;  
Where their feet have trod, the earth is taboo.

Mémé repeats, with a fearful expression: “They will come back.”

“They will come back,” Rara confirms. “But what does it matter?” he adds, proudly. “We are children of the crab.”

Along the edge of the swaying coconut-palms, a young man and a young woman are walking, their foreheads crowned with tiaras, and their little fingers linked. Yesterday, they were living amid the tribe. Now they are going to construct their hut of woven leaves. They extend their open hands toward the children: “Blessed is the crab.”

Raramémé reply, in chorus: “Blessed the armadillo.”

According to the blood from which they have emerged, and the dispositions testified by their minds, young Oyas, in their fourth spring, are marked with the sea-urchin, the armadillo, the crab, the bird of paradise, the kiwi or one of the other animals of the elect. Thus is fixed their parentage and their character. Tupo and Maila are children of the armadillo, which places them in an honorable rank,

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<sup>2</sup> In the language of Samoa, Atua means “god,” and the term is often used as a plural to refer to the gods of Polynesian peoples in general, so Lichtenberger’s appropriation of the term is highly idiosyncratic. Rahuo is an improvisation, as is the rest of the mythology of the Oyas, although it contains obvious echoes of actual Polynesian mythologies.

but Raramémé are children of the crab, as the glorious blue totem inscribed on their breasts attests; thus their blood is the most divine, for Rahuo is also the Great Crab—and instead of being separated in two intelligences, their soul is one.

With a slightly disdainful compassion, their eyes follow the young couple who are drawing away. By Rara's side, Mémé whispers, with pride and self-satisfaction: "Only those born united are truly united."

Indeed, it is in vain that others seek one another, coming together and contracting temporary bonds in the fashion of beasts. Two intelligences subsist in them. They are two lives, consecrated to two destinies. To the children of the crab it is given to be one in two bodies.

Before being marked, Raramémé had but one cradle in a single huge shell, and were nourished by the same teats. The sign that was conferred upon them by Manga-Yaponi, the old sage, only consecrated the manifest election of Rahuo. They have two heads, but one brain. If Rara coughs, Mémé feels a pain in her chest. When she goes away, he suffers an amputation. They wake up simultaneously, are hungry, thirsty and go to sleep simultaneously. They will extend their lips to the Black Flower simultaneously. By virtue of a special politeness, Rara has given Mémé his right arm, which is so strong; Mémé has given Rara the gentle little warm beast that beats beneath her left breast; but that is just a game. All of Rara is Mémé; all of Mémé is Rara. There is Raramémé.

In the times when the gods were less jealous of Oyas, the crab clan was very numerous. Today, there are only the two children, so they are tenderly venerated by their people. It is only the people of the octopus that continue to separate from them the old hatred that once made enemies of Kroum, the armored king with the strong claws and the sly Glonsk, the pulpy carcass with the viscous arms. The people of Kroum and the people of Glonsk never sit down to eat together.

It is because of the atavistic malediction in question that the squinting Mao, when he perceives the children as he crosses the strand, makes a detour to avoid contact with them. They have spotted him, however, and mock him: "Good hunting, octopus—look out for jellyfish!"

Of all the prey of the sea, the jellyfish, its carcass crystalline and opaline in the sunlight, is the most disdained.

Mao turns his head away, spits sideways, and points two fingers at the jeering pair to curse them. They laugh more uproariously and ward off his curses by turning their golden palms toward the sun.

But the sun is slowly sinking toward the horizon. The gulfs have sucked in the salty waters. The jagged coral is outlined in all directions. In their lattices and festoons the swarming life of the sea remains captive.

Sometimes wading waist-deep in the water, sometimes leaping from rock to rock, sometimes swimming a few lengths, Raramémé have reached the great reef, and proceed with the collection of sometimes-baroque mollusks, crustaceans and juicy algae.

In the thickets of the fortunate isle there are fruits, roots and other living things to maintain their life, but the children of the crab are fonder of the iodized and salty seeds of the sea than the impoverished and insipid seeds born of that morsel of dried-out sea, the land.

With a cry of triumph, Rara hauls out a jack mackerel that he has just harpooned. Mémé runs up to grab the tail and tear it with beautiful teeth. To tease her, Rara holds it over her head. She lets go, falls backwards, disappears into the water, reappears some distance away, shakes her soaked tresses, laughs, shouts, and dives repeatedly in pursuit of frightened turtles. Fifty meters away, however, a fin cleaves the surface of the torpid waves.

Mémé utters the warning cry: "Harrah!"

Flapping his arms and legs, Rara sends foam flying and regains the shore, swimming precipitately. He hoists himself out briskly, and, streaming, mocks the shark, tempted and disappointed. Mémé complains tenderly: "My arm hurts." As he landed, Rara has scratched himself on the spurs of the coral. She puts her lips on the wound in order to extract the evil spirit, only pausing to insult the shark—which continues prowling—with all the wrath of her puerile mouth, from which Rara's blood trickles in a thin thread.

Raramémé search the great reef, the scrupulous millenarian work of madrepores, with their subtle noses, their sharp eyes and their agile hands. Between the emergent calcareous slabs, magical submarine palaces conceal a prodigious pullulation of creatures, forms and seeds. In mysterious forests with perspectives of indefinite shadows and bizarrely-contorted trees, pink, mauve and blood-colored branches proliferate, where indescribable foliages hang down and float, in which paradoxical

fish and improbable crustaceans nest. Among the tresses, plumes, manes, spokes and clouds, stars scintillate, some of which are flowers and others beasts. Countless mollusks—jewels with infinitely various spirals, delicate, baroque or obscene marvels—yawn or crawl, radiant with all the colors of the rainbow.

Pincers and antennas extend from the orifices of lairs, where carapaces twitch. Predators lie flat, in ambush, and leap forth. Some of them are all head and mouth; others all stomach. Some are bristling with spikes, like chestnuts, others so flat that they are invisible in profile. Some are as dazzling as sapphires or emeralds, others confounded with the sand, stones and mosses. They project spears, saws, tentacles, fins, tails, horns, or the most deformed and inexplicable excrescences. Here and there, flying-fish with scarlet wings take flight fearfully, and fall back with a splash, fluttering desperately.

It is the fecund and inexhaustible flourishing of the sea, in which today's harvest is renewed and tomorrow's is growing. Only a few hundred kilometers from the fortunate isle, bottomless abysses are hollowed out in the ocean, closed to human curiosity. The animals and plants that our eyes have seen are excluded therefrom. A sealed, secret, inaccessible matrix, where what will be is perhaps slowly marinating below what is. In the air, the volcano Hakarou is scattering his heavy swirls. Of the millenarian collaboration of the madrepores and the central fire, that fugitive parcel, Oaleya the fortunate, was born. Perhaps, scarcely ten thousand years ago, it was still asleep in the gulfs. Perhaps, in another ten thousand years, it might sink again, or—who can tell?—might cleave the sky with a snowy peak.

The children sprawl on a bed of wrack. Their hunger appeased, they are no longer swallowing any but a few choice delicacies. By means of a long fish-bone, Mémé extracts a violet slug from its speckled shell and offers it to Rara. Rara offers her a couple of fat oysters, whose greenish flesh surrounds an opal cushion. But his dark eyes light up...

Mémé's foot is dangling in an irregular pool whose bottom is invisible. Toward the transparent surface, the tip of a thong extends from far below. It is twisting, undulating, making sly progress; now another becomes discernible, similarly sliding. Rara whispers something in Mémé's ear. She remains lying down, nonchalantly, looking out of the corners of her eyes, negligently playing with her amber ear-lobes. His lips taut, harpoon in hand, Rara climbs up on the rock, reaches an overhanging point and leans over. Three or four hideous serpents are extending avidly toward the tempting flesh: it is him!

A filthy bag inflates at the mouth of a cavern. Horrible eyes embellish the head-cum-belly. All of it moves with an atrocious flexibility and nightmarish velocity Rara throws his right arm back, balances his harpoon, hurls it with all the forces of his muscles, and, with a cry of triumph, hauls on the phormium cord. A monstrous star-flower emerges, bristling with pustules and helmeted with a tangle of vipers. The tentacles hiss, slap, twist and cling, struggling. One of them coils around Rara's arm, sticks there, and its thousand suckers pump his blood with powerful suction. Two others attempt to bind his legs. But Mémé has leapt upon the beast; her two nimble fists have already gripped the viscous pocket, twisting it victoriously. Sagging and blind, the mass of jasper flesh is in its death-throes, with frightful palpitations, on the coral platform. The two children take one another by the hand, and execute a mocking dance around it.

Glonsk slides and winds,  
Glonsk sucks and binds.  
Suck this, suck that, Glonsk is there,  
On the ocean bed  
His belly-head  
Extends and takes  
With his eight snakes  
That swarm and seek  
And coil and streak;  
Beware, your lusts,  
My harpoon thrusts,  
Whistles, hisses, lashes, cracks  
Mine the stone and mine the ax.

Die, Glonsk of the snaky gyve!  
Have no fear! Kroum is alive!

With all the might of their young lungs, the brown children repeat the centuries-old call over and over again: “Kroum is alive! Kroum is alive!”

And now, just as their young forms were once outlined on the surface of the waves, when Rahuo, the Great Crab, took existence from the eternal night and inscribed his image thereupon, so, to the call of their race, the blue crabs wake up, moving in their holes, clicking their pincers and running at the oblique trot of their eight legs. In a matter of seconds, the entire rocky promontory has come to life. There is a host of steely carapaces rolling, gliding, bumping into one another, climbing over one another. Some are smaller than snails, others larger than giant tortoises. Some are smooth and polished, mirroring the final rays of the setting sun; others are rough and rugged. Some are covered with fleeces of moss from which beards and wigs hang. All of them assemble around the children, beside the dead octopus, jostling in a rattling circle.

Waving their arms rhythmically, they intone a hymn:

Click, clock  
Crock, knock  
In the deep  
Are we asleep?  
Something’s died  
Let’s climb outside;  
Blood will revive,  
Kroum is alive!<sup>3</sup>

Click, clock  
Knock, block  
In my claws  
Everything scores  
Rips and cries  
Cuts and dies;  
Blood will arrive,  
Kroum is alive!

Click, clock,  
Block, mock  
Shall we go  
Back down below?  
To take our pride  
Away to hide;  
Blood will survive!  
Kroum is alive!

In each verse, at the moment when Raramémé utter the chorus, the entire horde raises its pincers, clicking the two halves together, bulging eyes gleaming.

The children fall silent and make the authorizing gesture: “Go!” Within a matter of seconds, the jostling wave has broken over the carcass. Mandibles grasp the hard flesh, ripping it apart, scattering it and swallowing it.

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<sup>3</sup> The final couplet is this version of the song, repeated three times, is *Sang fait du sang/Kroum est vivant* [Blood makes blood; Kroum is alive]. The former line is not invariable in later renderings, however, when lines encouraging the use of such rhymes as “revive,” “arrive” and “survive” are used; given their general propriety in the context of the plot it seemed reasonable to use them here as well, in the absence of any rhymed improvisation closer in significance to “blood makes blood.”

But the spirit of the sea, resting in the deep abysses that it has hollowed out, has become fat and swollen again. Here it comes, with an enormous soft murmur, from far away, rising up and licking the coral, soaking it with saliva and covering it up.

The children have returned to the beach of golden sand, and collapse there lazily. A great peace hangs in the limpid evening air.

A roseate breath bubbles beneath the smoke of Hakarou. The sea purrs. On the edge of the coconut palms, the last trills of the songbirds die away. Breezes pass by. The nocturnal phantoms are doubtless preparing to make their rounds. With their open palms, the children ward off the jealousy of the dead.

Busily, they proceed with their toilette, scrubbing one another, grooming one another and pampering one another. They have washed their bodies carefully and rubbed them with fine sand and handful of odorous herbs. With the aid of long thorns they part and smooth their hair. With agile fingers, Rara arranges Mémé's hair into symmetrical bangs. He polishes her cheeks and shoulders with a clump of juicy fucus. She carefully cleans his teeth, ears and fingernails, whose asperities she pares away with incisive thrusts.

They are so absorbed in their task that they pay no attention to the strange form that has just surged from the forest and is descending in their direction with an uneven gait. In Oaleya the happy, an individual does not rise up in hatred against his fellows. The gulfs between species, insurmountable elsewhere, are not hollowed out. Kour, the coral, is both stone and beast. Raina, the sea-anemone, is both flower and cephalopod. The plant Pakoa devours insects. Kiwi, the hairy bird, has no wings. Hapi, the squirrel, is akin to a bird. Pippi-kuink, the duck-billed mole, suckles young that hatch from eggs. Tiparu the armadillo is both tortoise and rat.

In Oaleya the fortunate, what is the hairy giant who is advancing on two feet, supporting his limping tread with a crutch?

He is undoubtedly an ape, more formidable than the most formidable in Africa or Malaysia. The colossal width of his torso, the length of his arms and its gait—his entire appearance—is reminiscent of the gorillas and the orangutans. He is a bear in the power of his neck and spine, the thickness of his limbs and its fleece, the growl rumbling in his torso.

Is he not entirely human, though? There is no muzzle, but a flat nose. Beneath the surmounting thatch, the commencement of a brow must lodge an embryo of thought. His legs are not terminated by hands or paws, but by human feet, save for the claws that terminate the toes.

And now that they have perceived the children, the eyes, previously unexpressive, light up.

Herr Klagenmeyer, if you saw the fame radiating there, how would you classify your former captive?

At the sound of his heavy, limping step, the children turn their heads, clap their hands and bound toward the newcomer like young domesticated dogs, leaping up to greet him.

"Kouang! It's the Hairy One."

They surround the hirsute mass with their capers, tugging at his arms, hanging on to his legs, climbing on to his back. The monster lets himself fall to the ground, groaning. Now they are rolling around with him, heads over heels. They get up again with volleys of laughter, grabbing handfuls of coarse hair, pinching him, manhandling him, climbing over him. A single excessively heavy blow from the gigantic limbs could crush the children, a flick could tear them into shreds, but the individual allows the teasing to proceed, with a faint purr. Astride the nape of his neck, Rara twists a crown of seaweed around his temples. Mémé offers him a calabash of fresh water, into which she has squeezed the juice of an orange. He drinks it without lapping, holding the vessel in his fingers, the palms of which are pink, like those of negroes.

The suave shadows fall. There is no longer anything in the sleeping woods but the sparse ululation of night-birds. With shrill whistles, silky bats are chasing one another. The glimmer of the volcano becomes redder beneath the pitch-black dome. But what murmurous apocalyptic drone, drawing nearer, is filling the atmosphere with a thunderous hum? Kouang, shrugging off the children, who fall backwards, comes to his feet with a single bound, Mouth open, breathless, his hair bristling, he challenges the unknown raptor, whose wingspan surpasses that of a condor...

Indifferently, the seaplane flies over the shore, changes course, and goes back out to sea. In a few seconds, it is no more than a black dot in the red stripe of the twilight.

Rara and Mémé have risen to their feet and, palms open, are saluting the spirit that is floating over the waters, among so many others—for it is the hour when souls, breaths and germs agitate tumultuously in the fortunate isle. Alongside the visible life, an entire invisible life quivers. Only the insane dare plunge themselves into adventure there. The wise are wary, and at least take care to swathe themselves in efficacious talismans that do not permit them to be confronted.

In the distance, over the southern headland, the spirits of the dead are palpitating. For three days they have remained languid, prowling around perishable bodies; then, obedient to Rahuo's order, they have been definitively torn away and are shivering as they await the typhoon that will carry them away. In the meantime, when night falls, they wander around the island, rustling in the foliage, drinking from springs, drifting over the marshes, leaning over sleepers.

Friend, do not becoming imprudently drowsy near stagnant water; escaping from your lips; your breath risks being captured by the spirits of the dead. You will wake up demented, or will not wake up at all.

If you have eaten the liver of a shark, if a heart of brass lodges in your breast, if old sage Manga-Yaponi has furnished you with the most powerful charms, that is the only moment when you might take the risk. Light a fire, throw flowers and cut grass on it according to the rites, pronounce the formulas that the ages whisper in the ear tremulously; the tamed gods will be constrained to come, and perhaps, from inconceivable gulfs, that which remains of the dead. That is the moment at which you might be able to communicate with those who were, and who perhaps still are, at least to a tiny degree.

That is the moment at which you might be able to communicate with those who will be—and who already are, for nothing upon the earth is born or disappears; everything exists eternally. The eternal homogeneity circles around you, indefinitely. The humans of today are only the passing faces of the humanity that, like the legendary serpent, is indefinitely swallowing its own tail.

On the northern edge of the pool of Taroa, the souls of the children that you will bring into the world are quivering invisibly, as well as those of their children and their great-grandchildren. Like impalpable moths, furtive dragonflies, iridescent bubbles, smokes, breaths, dusts and pollens, they float at the whim of breezes, swirl and steal away.

Husband, with your head crowned with gardenias, if you have built your hut, if you desire a newborn to open its eyes to you in Oaleya and perpetuate your totem, go hand-in-hand with your wife, kneel down beside Taroa and accomplish the vigil of souls. If it pleases Rahuo, your watch will not be sterile.

At this hour, the men and women gather around old Manga-Yaponi, crouching outside his hut, and they collect the precepts of his wisdom, the magic words and the talismans that his great age and experience have accumulated within him. For at this hour, attracted by the fire of dry bracken that he has lit, and which he maintains incessantly, mingling fetishes and aromatic herbs therein, all the spirits have come to flutter amid the flames.

The air that surrounds him is charged with the spiritual and the divine, as the spring breeze is charge with the perfume of roses. Skillfully, no matter how far they have come or how subtle they are, the old man captures the spirits, inhales them, distills them, digests them; and from his lips run torrents of precious honey. He proffers science, history, wisdom, healing and curses. Any question formulated falls into him as into an inexhaustible well of knowledge. He draws inestimable advice from it, perpetually. He grips the ungraspable, feels the impalpable.

Through his voice, the gods and the ancestors speak. Of the invisible he makes the visible; that which is no more is renewed, thanks to him. Perhaps other islands exist in the sea. There might be as many as ten of them, and perhaps more, but they are miry, miserable and diffuse regions; their substance is scarcely more tangible than that of the clouds that assemble in the sky and disperse there. If humans live there, they drag out a poor and incomplete existence.

Oaleya is the navel of the world, the center of existence. To tell the truth, it alone exists fully. People are only entirely alive while their feet are upon it; they begin to die as soon as they move away from it. At the moment when they pass over the horizon, they dissolve once again into the soft and uncertain Entity in which everything was before Rahuo became bored and created the world in which everything remains that his gesture has not withered.

Thus, the destiny of Oaleya and the Oyas that live there has earned them the jealousy of all the gods. It is not impossible to take them by surprise, to dupe them or disarm them with artful incantations, but Oaleya, which was born of the caprice of Rahuo, will return to mud at the caprice of

his whim. In the bosom of universal being, it is only a very tiny thing. Around it, death prowls with a thousand face; within it, it nourishes death.

Once, the people of Oyas were innumerable. They are still innumerable today, for what brain is sufficiently robust to count them? But when Manga-Yaponi's hair was black, the men and women of the tribe, squatting in the evening, covered all the terrain that extends from the chief's hut to the great hibiscus thickets. Today, half that area is sufficient to contain them all. Some poison is undoubtedly undermining the strength of the Oyas, exhausting and rarefying them.

That is a little sad, but it is not appropriate to be excessively afflicted by it. Before humans, very probably, the Moas, the great birds, were kings of the island. They have disappeared. The Oyas will likewise disappear. Perhaps, in their place, the pale gods will reign, or even the kangaroos. Or Rahuo might dissolve things completely; everything might return to the sea, and only Kroum will survive. That does not matter much. It is appropriate that everyone, unless they are mad, should await their destiny cheerfully.

In the meantime, of course, it is permissible for us to anticipate it. It might even be excellent. For, although the point is somewhat lacking in precision, it is quite plausible that somewhere, Rahuo has forged another blessed isle. Not much is known about it, except that out there, perhaps, other bodies might exist whose stomachs are larger and limbs more robust than those of the Oyas. There is reason to think that instead of floating, the playthings of typhoons, the souls of great chiefs and those who have been able to equip themselves with the most efficacious charms will succeed in joining them, in being reincarnated there, thus to taste once again, more ardently, the pleasures of love, of feasting and all the rest...

It therefore happens sometimes that not only those who are tormented by evil demons, but those animated by hardy—albeit somewhat presumptuous—souls seek the Black Flower prematurely; they have more chance of succeeding in their hazardous migration, being more robust, more able to struggle hard against the jealous powers, and perhaps able to capture younger and healthier forms, in order to lodge therein.

Minniloa, with the petals the color of night, flourishes under the great thickets of lataniers near the southern banks of Taroa. It is there that the sick and the old go painfully in quest of it, and sometimes, buoyantly, the amorous and reckless young hunters who brave the adventure. It is preferable that you gather it on the night that follows the full moon. You take it in the morning to Manga-Yaponi, the wise old man. All day, he pounds and kneads it in a calabash with other herbs, turtle-blood and the juice of certain mollusks, while pronouncing the formulas of which he has the secret. In the evening, he warms the mixture on the fire before which the tribe is assembled. At his command, the deadly principles complete their incorporation within it.

Take up the cup; empty it. Now you will sink into the great sleep and, the next day, your body will lie inert forever, unless the red ants have already covered it with their bandage. What will become of your soul? That is the mystery. If you miss your chance, weary of waiting in vain on the southern promontory, it will wander indefinitely through the woods, at random, and its plaints will frighten the living forever...

The night, the immense tropical night, has expanded. In the black sky, dense clusters of stars are ablaze in the infinite. The sea is similarly flamboyant. In myriads and myriads, the zoophytes have lit their fires. The entire surface of the calm waters is phosphorescent. Harmonious life is sweating, respiring, humming and radiating everywhere. Surrounded by the kiss of the ocean, languid beneath that of the stars, Oaleya is sleeping divinely.

With a dull moan, Kouang raises his head. His ears prick, catching a distant purr. It is not a storm. The volcano Hakarou is not angry. What demons are amusing themselves aping the thunder?

The children have woken up too, listening to the rumor. They mutter in unison: "May the passing gods be blessed," but they do not have the strength to raise their palms toward the unknown and fall asleep again.

Similar to the heavy waves that are breaking in the hollows of the cliffs, the distant rumble continues to purr. Is there not a glimmer on the horizon other than that of the stars, the sky or the sea? Houang's chops crease in a grimace of anger. With one of his muscular arms he takes hold of Rara; with the other he grabs Mémé, and he carries them away.

In a few strides he is at the entrance to the grotto, and crosses the threshold. His nostrils are soothed by the familiar odor of seaweed, dry grass and bat guano in the refuge he has chosen. He

deposits the two light bodies on the armfuls of wrack and forage that he has piled up. Rara's head lodges itself flirtatiously on Mémé's bosom, where the palpitating creature that she has given to him resides, and Mémé takes possession of Rara's arm, which is hers. Their even respiration is confused with the murmur of eternal life.

Then Kouang goes to sleep too. From time to time, a faint groan escapes his monstrous breast—because Kouang, whether he is asleep or awake, cannot escape the terrible images engraved in his by the horror of his destiny.

For this is the destiny of Kouang...