

On the Stylistic Constraints in Literary Translation: A Case Study of the Translation of J.M.G.  
Le Clézio's *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* into English

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## Abstract

J. M. G. Le Clézio was the recipient of the 2008 Nobel Prize in Literature. His *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* was published in 2011. It is a breathtaking collection of short stories which paints the portraits of women determined to fight off the difficulties they encounter. These tales have yet to be officially translated into English. The aim of this thesis was threefold—while being a translation into English of *Histoire du pied*, it set out to provide a better understanding of the subject of stylistics in relation to literary translation. It also posited that due to stylistic “constraints” (Boase-Beier 2006: 54), literary translators leave inevitable “fingerprints” (Baker 2000: 244) and resort to “textual deformation” (Berman 2000: 286), partly naturalizing the target text in the process. I focused on the stylistic issues—namely issues pertaining to sentence structure and syntax, diction and figurative language, encountered during my translation. My stylistic choices left traces in the target text, inevitably combining authorial and translational style.

## Résumé

J. M. G. Le Clézio fut Lauréat du Prix Nobel de littérature en 2008. *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies*, un recueil de nouvelles qui dépeint des femmes déterminées à combattre les difficultés de la vie, parût en 2011. Ces récits n'ont pas encore été officiellement traduits en anglais. Tout en étant une traduction en anglais d'*Histoire du pied*, ce projet de mémoire avait pour but d'apporter une meilleure compréhension de la stylistique par rapport à la traduction littéraire ainsi que de prouver qu'en raison de «contraintes» (Boase-Beier 2006: 54) stylistiques, les traducteurs littéraires laissent d'inévitables «empreintes» (Baker 2000: 244) et ont recours à la «déformation textuelle» (Berman 2000: 286), naturalisant ainsi en partie le texte cible. Nous nous sommes concentrés sur les questions, à savoir stylistiques et sur celles relatives à la structure des phrases et à la syntaxe, à la diction et au langage figuré, rencontrées lors de notre traduction. Nos choix stylistiques ont laissé des traces dans le texte cible, combinant inévitablement le style du traducteur à celui de l'auteur.

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Thank you.

*To my children, Huda and Mehdi—the guided ones...*

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## Introduction

J. M. G. Le Clézio's stories have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. *Mondo et autres histoires* was the first Le Clézio work that we were exposed to as children in Mauritius. It is a collection of eight short stories. In each tale, we come across a child longing for a life free from the shackles of modern existence. We first meet Mondo himself, an amazing little boy who gives his name to the collection of stories. He walks through Nice (Le Clézio's hometown), asking total strangers in the streets whether they would like to adopt him: "... quand il y avait quelqu'un qui lui plaisait, il l'arrêta et lui demandait tout simplement "est-ce que vous voulez m'adopter?" (Le Clézio 1982: 11). All these children are particularly mindful of things usually beyond the understanding of others their age. Le Clézio encourages the reader to see reality through the eyes of these characters. Henky explains how the senses are crucial in these stories, emphasizing how the author celebrates "la puissance du vrai regard" (2004: 226), hence the insight of these Le Clézian characters.

After *Mondo et autres histoires*, I moved on to other works by Le Clézio. Being Mauritian contributed to my attraction to and curiosity about his stories as Le Clézio happens to be of Mauritian descent and many of his stories reflect his undeniable attachment to Mauritius. I find it exciting to stumble upon Mauritian Creole words and names of places like Rose-Hill (my hometown), Moka and many others—words and places that mostly inhabitants of Mauritius know. I feel proud to have the love for this small island in common with Le Clézio.

Despite being the recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature in 2008, Le Clézio is unfortunately not very well known in the English-speaking world. Some of his works like *L'enfant de sous le pont*, *Révolutions*, *Ballaciner*, *Ritournelle de la faim*, *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies*, *Tempête: Deux novellas* among others, have not been translated into English. Many Anglophone friends here in Québec to whom I mentioned his name had never heard of him. Hence for this thesis, I chose to work on the translation of Le Clézio's *Histoire du Pied et autres fantaisies*, published in 2011. It is a breathtaking collection of short stories where he paints the portraits of courageous women who fight off the difficulties that life throws at them.

Through the translation into English of *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies*, this thesis provides a better understanding of the subject of stylistics in relation to literary translation. It also

shows that stylistic “constraints” (Boase-Beier 2006: 54) cause literary translators to leave inevitable “fingerprints” (Baker 2000: 244) and to resort to “textual deformation” (Berman 2000: 286), partly naturalizing the target text in the process. I will first begin with an introduction of Le Clézio and his works, followed by the critical reception of his works in the French and English-speaking worlds and by an overview of *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies*. Given that style, which is the choice of a particular mode of expression, is “central to the way we construct and interpret texts” (Boase-Beier 2006: 1), a chapter on style, stylistics and the elements that make up literary stylistics will follow. Reference to style in relation to translation can be traced back to early writings by Cicero and Horace (Boase-Beier 2006:1). More recently, various attempts have been made to explore this topic, namely by Meschonnic in 1970 (but he preferred the term poetics to style), Koller in 1979, Munday in 2001 and others (Boase-Beier 2006: 1). The traditional approach to style in translation has mostly been source-oriented. More importance was given to the style of the source text and it was widely believed that “a translator cannot have, indeed should not have, a style of his own or her own” and the translation should “simply reproduce as closely as possible the style of the original” (Baker 2000: 244). Recent studies have not been as rigid and some scholars have argued for the recognition of the translator’s style, namely Mona Baker in 2000 and more recently Gabriela Saldanha in 2011 and 2014, and they have tried to “legitimize translations as stylistic domains in their own right” (Saldanha 10). According to Baker, no matter how willing the translator is to reproduce the style of the author, traces of translational style will inevitably be left in the target text. She compares these traces to translator’s “fingerprints” because “it is as impossible to produce a stretch of language in a totally impersonal way as it is to handle an object without leaving one’s fingerprints on it” (2000: 244). She questions the demand on the translator to reproduce exactly the style of the original.

A comprehensive investigation about style in relation to translation has also been carried out by Jean Boase-Beier in her 2006 book *Stylistic Approaches to Translation* where she focuses on the place of stylistics in translation theory and its place in the translation process. Her view is somewhat source-oriented but she does acknowledge the stylistic value of the target text (Saldanha 2011: 11). Indeed, the study of style is essential in order to understand the different choices a translator makes as there are stylistic decisions involved in the process of transferring meaning from one language to another. For Leech and Short, style is an important factor in the literary genre and “stylistic knowledge is a prerequisite for literary translation because stylistics

is a study that explains “the relation between language and artistic function” (2009: 13). This knowledge helped me better understand Clézio’s style and choose certain words, phrases and sentence structures in the target language. The style of the source-text author also provided a set of “constraints” upon the “stylistic choices” (Boase-Beier 2006: 54) I made.

I will focus on those stylistic “choices” (Boase-Beier 2006: 54) pertaining to sentence structure and syntax, diction and figurative language. In her article *Translating J.M.G. Le Clézio* (1997), Alison Anderson gives a comprehensive analysis of her experience translating Le Clézio’s *Onitsha* (Onitsha) and *La Quarantaine* (The Quarantine) into English and she acknowledges the stylistic difficulties which she came across in her rendering. Like Anderson, I found “the very long sentence[s]” with “the accumulation of images” and “the rich vocabulary and subordinate clauses” (1997: 697) in *Histoire du pied* particularly hard to translate. In the end, the source text became a combination of two styles—that of the author and that of the translator. I will show that these choices in turn left “fingerprints” (Baker 2000: 244) and led to what Antoine Berman calls “deforming tendencies” (2000: 288). He considers that translators often resort to “textual deformation” (286) which destroys the foreignness of the source text. The third chapter will show that this “textual deformation” can be compared to the “fingerprints” that a translator leaves behind and is the direct result of stylistic “choices” (Boase-Beier 2006: 54). I will wrap up with the translation into English of *Histoire du Pied*.

## CHAPTER ONE: J.M.G. LE CLEZIO AND *HISTOIRE DU PIED ET AUTRES FANTAISIES*

### 1.1 Biographical Details and Critical Reception of Works

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, known as J.M.G. Le Clézio in the literary world, was born in 1940, in Nice, France. He holds both French and Mauritian nationalities as his family on his father's side had immigrated to the formerly French and subsequently British colony of Mauritius. He spent some of his childhood years in Nigeria, where his father practised medicine. He then proceeded to complete his secondary education in France. After studying English at Bristol University, he returned to France, where he earned an undergraduate degree in 1963 from the Institut d'Études Littéraires and a Master's degree in 1964 from the University of Aix-en-Provence, followed by a PhD from the University of Perpignan (Thibault 2009: 9).

Le Clézio made his debut as a novelist with the publication in 1963 of *Le procès-verbal* (*The Interrogation* by Daphne Woodward)<sup>1</sup> for which he was awarded the prestigious Prix Renaudot. He was only 23 years old. Other publications that further consolidated Le Clézio's reputation in France include the short-story collection *La Fièvre* (*Fever* by Daphne Woodward) in 1965 and the novels *Le Déluge* (*The Flood* by Peter Green) in 1966; *Terra Amata* (*Terra Amata* by Barbara Bray) in 1967, *La Guerre* (*War* by Simon Watson Taylor) in 1970, and *Les Géants* (*The Giants* by Simon Watson Taylor) in 1973.

Steven Serafin explains how Le Clézio has traveled widely and taught at a number of universities around the world. The author studied other cultures, namely the peoples of Mexico and Central America, which he wrote about in *Trois villes saintes* (1980), *Le rêve mexicain; ou, la pensée interrompue* (*The Mexican Dream, or, The Interrupted Thought of Amerindian Civilizations* by Teresa Lavender Fagan) in 1988; and *La fête chantée* (1997). Serafin also describes Le Clézio as being “drawn to those who are marginalized in society” and says that his portrayals are “compassionate and evocative”, given that his characters are often in search of “meaning, identity, as well as reintegration”. In *Désert* (*Desert* by C. Dickson) in 1980, after having left for Marseilles, Lalla, a North African Berber comes back to her desert homeland to

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<sup>1</sup> English translations and translators are indicated in parentheses.

fully embrace her cultural inheritance (Barclay 2011: 2). *Désert* was awarded Le Grand Prix Paul Morand by the French Academy.

Since the publication of *Onitsha* (Onitsha by Alison Anderson) in 1991, a tale influenced by his childhood in Nigeria, Le Clézio began incorporating semiautobiographical details in his writings, as in *La Quarantaine* (The Quarantine by Alison Anderson) in 1995 and *Révolutions* in 2003. And in *L'Africain* (The African by David R. Godine) in 2004, Le Clézio recounts how he was reunited with his father after World War II (Serafin). He was awarded the most prestigious literary prize, namely the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2008. *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* followed in 2011. His latest work is *Tempête: Deux novellas*, published in 2014. Le Clézio's phenomenal body of work includes nineteen novels, twenty essays, nine collection of short stories, three travel diaries and nine books for children. He also translated into French *The Books of Chilam Balam*, originally written in the Yucatec Maya language. In the light of all his accomplishments, I have to agree with Bruno Thibault when he says that Le Clézio is one of the greatest living French writers—"Le Clézio est certainement l'un des plus grands écrivains vivants de langue française" (2009: 9).

## 1.2 Critical Reception of Le Clézio's Works in the English-Speaking World

Despite being a prolific writer acclaimed in France, Le Clézio was not very well known in the Anglophone world before the announcement of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature. Maxim Jakubowski admits that Le Clézio is “overdue for recognition - and translation” and the fact that he is “virtually out of print in English is both sad and a reflection of our traditional insularity and lack of curiosity for foreign culture.”

Jakubowski explains how Le Clézio was once nicknamed the Steve McQueen of French writing by the French popular press because of his good looks, blond hair and his passion for adventure. Readers are now rediscovering his first novels. When the English translation of *Le procès-verbal* was published in 2010, there was nothing but praise for the French writer. David Bellos, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Princeton University who is also well known in the Translation Studies world, lauded Le Clézio's *The Interrogation* (Daphne Woodward) on the back cover:

“When it appeared in 1963, *The Interrogation* brought a strange and haunting new voice to French Literature. Icy and passionate, controlled and intoxicated, *The Interrogation* made readers sit up and take notice of a writer only twenty-three years of age. Half a century later this unprecedented, brilliant and profoundly influential work remains the cornerstone of Le Clézio's reputation and assures it a permanent place in the pantheon of French literature.”

On the same back cover, Barbara Probst-Solomon from *The New York Times Book Review* wrote that “it is powerful and daring” and also added that Le Clézio “has altered the form of the novel” which in itself speaks volumes.

### 1.3 *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies*—an Overview

Le Clézio's collection of stories *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* (2011) is made up of ten tales—*Histoire du pied*, *Barsa, ou barsaq*, *L'arbre Yama*, *L.E.L.*, *derniers jours*, *Nos vies d'araignées*, *Amour secret*, *Bonheur*, *Yo*, *Personne* and *A peu près apologue*. The author paints the portraits of women who courageously fight the difficulties they encounter. There is Ujine, the young law student who chooses to keep her unborn child even when she finds herself up against her cowardly and irresponsible lover Samuel. We then meet the incredible Fatou who saves her lover, Watson and brings him back safe and sound after his unsuccessful attempt to immigrate to Spain. We have Yama, a loving grandmother who gathers enough courage to hide her granddaughter Mari during the war. Mari, in turn, as an adult, will save her friend Esmée from savage rebels.

Le Clézio's depiction of the remarkable modern feminine characters in these tales illustrates perfectly why Marina Salles calls the writer "le peintre de la vie moderne"<sup>2</sup>. She describes Le Clézio as being particularly concerned about the problems that affect contemporary society. Keith A. Moses also describes Le Clézio in similar terms:

"Although Le Clézio is not a didactic thinker, as he even expresses his distrust of any type of dogmatic ideology that claims to possess definitive answers for life's greatest mysteries, his narratives often pose disconcerting questions related to the realities of the increasingly interconnected and interdependent modern world." (2012: xi)

The author's ability to create vivid and emblematic characters is undeniable. He brings out the best in these women and his exquisite descriptions serve to create an exotic décor as backdrop to their stories.

In their book, Léger, Roussel and Salles describe Le Clézio as "passeur des arts et des cultures"<sup>3</sup>. This is particularly true concerning *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* where some of the plots are delicately flavoured with African customs and rites (*Barsa ou barsaq*, *L'arbre*

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<sup>2</sup> The title of the book itself is *Le Clézio, peintre de la vie moderne*.

<sup>3</sup> The very title of their book is *Le Clézio, passeur des arts et des cultures*.

*Yama and L.E.L derniers jours*). Also, Le Clézian readers are transported to whole new settings by the mere mention of exotic places as in *Histoire du pied*:

« Et toutes ces villes, tous ces pays dont les noms s'affichaient sur les moniteurs, Seoul, Tokyo, Osaka, Guam, San Francisco, Denver, Rome, Berlin, Abu Dhabi, Bangkok, Angkor, Manille, Maurice, Mexico» (Le Clézio 2011: 49)

#### 1.4 *Histoire du pied*—a Glimpse

In *Histoire du pied*, we get to meet a young woman named Ujine whose very story gives its name to the collection of tales. What strikes the reader from the early pages of the story is the main character's apparent obsession with her feet. Ujine, we are told, has big toes and she walks on her heels like a penguin. Throughout the story, the difficulties and hardships that Ujine encounters will help make her stronger. She will fall madly in love and later become desperate. She will struggle with her inner demons before realizing that her unborn child is the most important thing in the world.

Le Clézio describes Ujine's feet as being different in a unique way, having been criticized because of them all her life. Her lover Samuel's feet, on the other hand, are described by Ujine herself as being "des pieds d'artiste" (Le Clézio 2011: 23)—artist's feet. Ujine will go out of her way to please this young man—she will dance, she will wear high heels but the cynical Samuel is not worthy of the young woman's adoration. When she learns that she is carrying his child, instead of being drawn in a downward spiral of despair and grief, Ujine will gather the pieces of her shattered dreams and go on with her life with all the courage and determination she can muster:

« Il ne fallait pas laisser revenir le vide. Chaque minute, chaque seconde compte. Il faut marcher, aller au cours, à la Fac de droit, à la chambre de commerce, chercher du travail, s'inscrire à la gym, aux visites de musées, aux randonnées, au chant, aux ateliers. Marcher, parler, écouter, de toutes ses forces, du matin au soir, même la nuit, sans s'arrêter, sans penser, monter-descendre, enregistrer, compter, diviser, juger, sans jamais attendre.» (Le Clézio 2011: 50)

## CHAPTER 2: STYLISTICS AND LITERARY TRANSLATION

This chapter investigates the relationship between stylistics and literary translation. To understand the concept of stylistics, I will first look at the notion of style. Then, I will turn to those elements of literary stylistics that will pertain to my study of Le Clézio's style, namely sentence structure and syntax, diction and figurative language. I will wrap up with an overview of the traditional approach to style in translation.

### 2.1 Style

Style is mentioned frequently in numerous fields and is used in several interlinked areas, namely literary criticism, sociolinguistics, translation studies and especially stylistics. According to Katie Wales in *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (2001: 312), the word 'style' comes from 'stylus', which originally meant "instrument for writing" but later, the meaning changed to "manner of writing".

Definitions of style vary according to the field with which authors want to make links with, whether it is with "rhetoric, with structural linguistics, with generative linguistics, or with any other subsequent development in linguistics or literary studies" (Boase-Beier 2006: 12). But traditionally, style has been defined as "the manner of linguistic expression in prose or verse—as 'how' speakers or writers say whatever it is they have to say" (Abrams 1999: 303). In a similar line, Leech and Short define it as "the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose, and so on." (2009: 11)

Indeed, in either spoken or written forms, we use the rules of language, but there are variations so as to change meanings or say the same thing in different ways. Hence, the concept of style is based upon different ways language is used in order to negotiate meaning.

## 2.2 Stylistics

The linguistic study of style is known as stylistics. According to Burke, stylistics is sometimes also referred to as ‘literary linguistics’ and it studies and analyzes literary texts in particular, but not exclusively (2014: 1). This extends the scope of stylistics beyond literature to non-literary forms of language. Examples of such forms include advertising, academic writing, news reports as well as non-printed forms such as TV and pictorial advertising, film, and multimodal publications (Nørgaard 2010: 1). In fact, it refers to all kinds of language use but stylistics is primarily concerned with the literary focus of style, whether that form of literature is prestigious or not:

“The preferred object of study in stylistics is literature, whether that be institutionally sanctioned ‘Literature’ as high art or more popular ‘noncanonical’ forms of writing.” (Simpson 2004: 2)

The origins of stylistics can be traced back to the ancient classical world, namely to Aristotle’s *Poetics* and more particularly to his *Rhetoric*. It became a significant academic field within linguistics in the 1960s (Wales 2001: 269), thanks to Russian Formalists like Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky (Nørgaard 2010: 2) and it has continued to attract attention ever since. The ‘tool kit’ or ‘tool box’ is a metaphor often used to describe the interdisciplinary nature of stylistics, not only because it brings together linguistics and literary studies but also because it borrows views from fields like philosophy, cultural theory, sociology, history and psychology (Nørgaard 2010: 2).

Stylisticians are concerned with the study of the language of literature or the study of the language habits of particular authors and their writing patterns. They use linguistic models, theories and frameworks to describe and explain how and why a text works as it does. The main aim of stylistics is to enable us to understand the intent of the author in the way the information has been conveyed and stylisticians do so by examining grammar, lexis, and semantics as well as other elements.

## 2.3 Elements of Literary Stylistics

As mentioned above, the aim of stylistics is to analyze language habits and to explain why certain features have been used as opposed to other alternatives. Leech and Short agree that we study style to explain this but they add that literary stylistics also explains the relation between language and artistic function (2009: 110). They argue that the literary stylistician is mostly concerned with how a particular form of expression creates an “aesthetic effect” (Leech and Short 2009: 11).

Literary stylistics comprises many literary elements that an author employs to create this “aesthetic effect” (Leech and Short 2009: 11) as well as a distinct feel for a work. These elements include, but are not limited to sentence structure and syntax, pace, vocabulary, figures of speech, dialogue, diction, tone and allusion. I will analyze three of these elements, namely sentence structure and syntax, figurative language and diction which are particularly noteworthy in Le Clézio’s style.

### Diction

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* describes diction as:

“The choice of words used in a literary work. A writer's diction may be characterized, for example, by \*ARCHAISM, or by \*LATINATE or Anglo-Saxon derivations; and it may be described according to the oppositions formal/colloquial, abstract/concrete, and literal/figurative.” (2001: 65)

An author’s diction is made up of various choices. The language used might be colloquial in one situation and formal in another. Authors may also use certain words or phrases repeatedly, making these distinct characteristics of their writing.

### Sentence structure and syntax

*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* describes syntax as “the way in which linguistic elements (as words) are put together to form constituents (as phrases or clauses)”. Sentence length, sentence structure and sentence pattern come together to form syntax. Diction and syntax

are closely linked since syntax determines how chosen words are used to form a sentence. Hence, a complex diction will mean a complex syntactic structure.

### **Figurative Language**

Figurative language is language that uses figures of speech to make a particular linguistic point. It is very common in poetry but is used in prose as well. Abrams describes it in these terms:

“Figurative Language is a conspicuous departure from what users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect. Figures are sometimes described as primarily poetic, but they are integral to the functioning of language and indispensable to all modes of discourse.”(1999: 96)

Figurative language includes but is not restricted to metaphors, similes and personifications. I will focus on personifications in my analysis of Le Clézio’s style. When something that is not human is given human-like qualities, this is known as personification.

## 2.4 The Importance of Style in Literary Translation

The earliest document that mentions the importance of style in literary translation in the West can be traced back to Cicero. According to Douglas Robinson (2002: 10), Cicero was the first to comment on translation processes and how to undertake them. In his *The Best Kind of Orator*, Cicero mentions his concern with preserving the style of the language when he translated the famous orations of eloquent Attic orators from Greek to Latin (Robinson 2002: 11). Cicero argues that he aimed to preserve “the general style and force of the language”, to give the target readers the same “weight” of the speeches as they were delivered in original Greek. For him, individual words are not important in their own right, so long as the overall weight of the original is maintained (Robinson 2002: 11).

In fact, Boase-Beier states that style is central to the construction and interpretation of any text (2006: 1). Also, a translator who possesses stylistic knowledge will produce a better rendering than one without. She states that “a translator who is stylistically aware is likely to be able more fully to appreciate both stylistic effects and the state of mind or view that informs them.” (Boase-Beier 2006: 29). This is true concerning literary as well as non-literary texts, but the distinction is more apparent in literary works. Also, “stylistic knowledge is a prerequisite for literary translation because stylistics is a study that explains “the relation between language and artistic function” (Leech and Short 2009: 13). My analysis accords with Boase-Beier as well as with Leech and Short, for I found that this “prerequisite” indeed helped me choose particular words, phrases or sentence structures in the target language, shaping the target text in the process.

## 2.5 Source-Oriented or Target-Oriented Approach?

There are two main types of translation approaches. One focuses on the source text while the other emphasizes the creation of a target text that sounds natural in the target language. Traditionally, these approaches have been known as word-for-word translation vs. sense-for-sense translation or source-oriented translation vs. target-oriented translation. Both source-oriented and target-oriented approaches have their advocates. While some assert that a translation is mainly a copy of the original and that it should replicate the tone and linguistic structures of the source text, others maintain that the main function of a translation is to convey the information contained by the source text to the target readership so that it is fully accessible to them. Over the years, different scholars have described these two approaches using different oppositions: formal equivalence vs. dynamic equivalence by Eugene Nida; semantic translation vs. communicative translation by Peter Newmark, who claims that “the central problem of translating has always been whether to translate literally or freely” (1993: 45); foreignization vs. domestication by Lawrence Venuti, among others.

The traditional approach to style in translation has mostly been source-oriented. It was widely believed that translation is a secondary activity. Hence, the translator should not have a style of their own and they should replicate the style of the target text as precisely as possible. Recent studies have not been as rigid and some scholars have even argued for the recognition of the translator’s style, namely Mona Baker in 2000 and more recently Gabriela Saldanha in 2011, among others. Saldanha herself claims that, although scholars like Malmkjær and Boase-Beier see the style of translation as influenced by the subjective interpretation of the translator, the focus remains clearly source-oriented, i.e. on the source text’s style and its reproduction (Saldanha 2011: 100).

Antoine Berman considers that translators often resort to “textual deformation” (2000: 286) which destroys the foreignness of the source text. His twelve “deforming tendencies” which are “the series of tendencies or forces that cause translation to deviate from its essential aim”

(2000: 287), place him with ‘sourcerers’<sup>4</sup> like Boase-Beier and Malmjkaer. He is against naturalizing the target text by bringing it as close as possible to the receiving culture:

“The negative analytic is primarily concerned with ethnocentric, annexationist translations and hypertextual translations (pastiche, imitation, adaptation, free rewriting), where the play of deforming forces is freely exercised.” (2000: 286)

He also refers to translation as the “trials of the foreign” and examines the system of deformations—different forms of domestication—that operates in every translation. He calls this examination the “analytic of translation”—a detailed analysis of the deformation tendencies that prevents the target reader from fully experiencing the foreign culture (2000: 286). According to Andrew Chesterman, when Berman calls these features “deforming tendencies”, he is making a value judgement and implying that literary translation should not have these features or else “people will react by not liking the translation” (2004: 6-7).

On the other hand, a clearly target-oriented perspective is adopted by Baker, who focuses on translator style, understood as “a kind of thumb-print that is expressed in a range of linguistic – as well as non-linguistic – features”, including open interventions, the translators’ choice of what to translate, their consistent use of specific strategies, and especially their characteristic use of language, their “individual profile of linguistic habits, compared to other translators” (2000: 245). According to Baker, in the process of recreation, the translator’s labour is obvious through their selection and organization of words, their long or short sentence structures, or their plain or oratory way of speech (2000: 245), thus leaving their “fingerprints” (244) on the target text. All such labours “deserve praise and appreciation” (2000: 245). As for Saldanha, she places herself at the target-oriented end of the debate with Baker and she also firmly believes that for translation to be considered as a literary activity, the concept of style is very important (2011: 100).

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Sourcerers’ as opposed to ‘targeteers’ —terms used by Newmark. Reference is in *Literary Translation, a Practical Guide* by Landers (p. 51).

### **CHAPTER 3: STYLISTIC ‘CONSTRAINTS’ IN THE TRANSLATION OF *HISTOIRE DU PIED ET AUTRES FANTAISIES***

This chapter will deal with the notions of ‘constraint’ and ‘choice’ in relation to stylistics. My main focus will be how and why my translation of *Histoire du pied* preserves or avoids certain words, expressions, syntactical structures, punctuation, and stylistic elements from the original. Berman considers the main aim of translation to be the preservation of the foreign in both a cultural and a linguistic sense. I will focus on the linguistic aspect here. I will also show how the “deforming tendencies” (2000: 287) are inevitable in certain cases and are the direct result of “stylistic constraints” and “choices” (Boase-Beier 2006: 54).

#### **3.1 Style, Choice and Constraints**

While examining the concept of stylistics in relation to literary translation, it is also important to focus on the concept of choice. I agree with Boase-Beier when she says that “the style of the source-text author will thus provide a set of constraints upon the stylistic choices made by the translator” (2006: 54). The concept of choice is crucial in stylistics as it deals with the different options that are available to a text producer and depending on the situation and genre, the writer chooses specific words in order to express what they want. This also holds true for the translator. Stylisticians are interested with why one particular structure is preferred to another. Hence, “choices in style are motivated, even if unconsciously, and these choices have a profound impact on the way texts are structured and interpreted” (Simpson 2004: 22).

The study of style is essential in order to understand the different choices a translator makes as there are stylistic decisions involved in transferring meaning from one language to another. Henceforth, this thesis will focus mainly on analyzing the “constraints” involved in translating Le Clézio’s *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* which led to the specific “stylistic choices” (2006: 54) and “deforming tendencies” (2000: 286).

### 3.2 Stylistics ‘Constraints’ and ‘Choices’ in the Translation of Le Clézio’s *Histoire du Pied et autres fantaisies* into English

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Abrams stresses that:

“The style specific to a particular work or writer, or else distinctive of a type of writings, has been analyzed in such terms as the rhetorical situation and aim; characteristic diction, or choice of word; types of sentence structure and syntax and the density and kinds of figurative language.” (1999: 303)

It is precisely Le Clézio’s “characteristic diction”, sentence structures and syntax as well as figurative language in *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* that will be the main focus of this section. These stylistic elements are particularly hard to translate in many of Le Clézio’s texts which are made up of very long sentences containing an accumulation of images, with subordinate clauses and rich vocabulary (Anderson 1997: 697). In her article *Translating J.M.G. Le Clézio* (1997), Alison Anderson gives a comprehensive analysis of her experience translating Le Clézio’s *Onitsha* and *La Quarantaine* into English and she acknowledges that there are certain specific stylistic constraints in translating Le Clézio’s texts, including those mentioned above.

#### a. Sentence Structure and Syntax

In *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies*, Le Clézio’s literary style is made up of a combination of long sentences and short abrupt phrases. I found that some of these long sentences provide “a set of constraints upon the stylistic choices made by the translator” (Boase-Beier 2006: 54). In the following example, the “stylistic choices” I made while translating this specific sentence left traces and changed the sentence structure and syntax of the source text.

### Example :

« L'idée du froid, sans doute, la masse mouvante de la mer qui déferle (les pieds peuvent-ils entendre?) mais le souffle du vent du large, le souffle venu des profondeurs de l'horizon et remontant la côte au moment de la marée, et glissant sur la jeune femme en bikini, hérissant chaque poil le long des jambes, caressant la peau d'une main froide, le ventre au nombril orné d'un piercing vert, les seins dans le soutien-gorge aux bonnets triangulaires, jusqu'au visage renversé, abandonné, lui, complètement, les yeux révoltés derrière les paupières closes, les cheveux voltigeant s'emmêlant jusqu'à cacher le visage, une mèche folle détachée des autres qui va et vient d'une joue à l'autre par-dessus le pont du nez entre les yeux. » (Le Clézio 2011: 11-12)

Our first impression of this passage is of a meticulously detailed setting of the scene for the story. The description is so clearly etched that we can reconstruct, in our mind's eye, the whole scene. This passage is rendered even more striking when we realize that it consists of one single sentence. I counted a whopping 133 words and 13 commas. Through certain specific features, we can explore and give descriptions of the physical appearance of a literary text. Here, the author's use of punctuation to create stylistic effects is significant. At first, I wanted to preserve all the punctuation marks as I believe that Le Clézio's skilful and abundant use of commas in this sentence are relevant to the setting of the story through this descriptive passage where we get a vivid sense of nature and human life becoming one. However that was not possible.

I had to use periods to separate the sentence into three shorter ones at the specific instances where I felt that it would not change the beautiful descriptive flow of the source text. I also chose to use an em dash in much the way a colon or a set of parentheses is used. I found it appropriate as it shows a change in thought here. I did consider a period first but it eventually turned out to be too strong as the pause is not supposed to be a long one and it would have broken the staccato rhythm intended by the author. Next, I considered the comma which proved to be too weak before finally settling for the em dash.

“The thought of the cold, no doubt. With the sea moving in waves engulfing the beach, not the sound of the ocean (can the feet hear?) but the open sea breeze, rising from the depths of the horizon and blowing back up the coastline during high tide—the breeze gliding over the bikini-clad young woman causing each and every hair along the thigh to bristle, caressing with a cold hand the skin, the belly button adorned with a green piercing, the breasts held by the triangular cup bras, making its way to face thrown back, abandoned, with eyes rolled upwards behind closed lids. Fluttering hair strands tangled up to completely hide the face, with a wild strand breaking free from the others, swinging from one cheek to the other over the bridge of the nose, between the eyes.” (My translation)

Le Clézio’s long sentence has a special connection with rhythm. When read out loud, this particular sentence can be said to be designed to sound like a poem through the staccato rhythm created by the abundant use of commas. Therefore, any change in the sentence structure will upset its cadence. I tried to adhere as much as possible to the punctuation and the length of the sentence fragments as they are in the original. Rationalization would be obvious and would result in deformation of the rhythm of the text. For Berman, rationalization affects the syntactical structures of the original, starting with an important element in a prose text, namely punctuation (2000: 288). For instance, breaking up this long sentence into several smaller sentences with periods is what Berman would call rationalizing. He also adds that it could be recomposing sentences, changing their order, or rearranging them according to a certain idea or discursive order. Another aspect of “rationalization” is abstractness, which annihilates what Berman considers an inherent element of prose: “its drive toward concreteness” (2000: 289). This tendency can make the original pass from concrete to abstract by changing the order in sentences, by translating verbs into nouns, and by generalizing (Berman 2000: 289). However, rationalization was inevitable here as it was impossible to keep the translation in one single sentence in English as the author did in French.

Although more common in poetry, rhythm is particularly important in this short story and can be ‘destroyed’ by deformation of word order and punctuation. The destruction of rhythms has significant relevance to the translation of Le Clézio’s *Histoire du pied*. One way to destroy these rhythms, for instance, is “an arbitrary revision of punctuation” (2000: 292). Breaking up

the long sentence can also be seen as destroying the rhythm of the source text but it also constructs the rhythm and style of the target text.

No matter how willing I was to reproduce the authorial style, I inevitably left traces of my own style in the translation. Baker compares these traces to translator’s “fingerprints”. She questions the demand on the translator to reproduce exactly the style of the original, because “it is as impossible to produce a stretch of language in a totally impersonal way as it is to handle an object without leaving one’s fingerprints on it” (Baker 2000: 244).

At other times, I managed to stick to the same structure like fly-paper when I did not want to shift emphasis in meaning. I was able to do that only when Le Clézio’s sentences were not too long and when the clauses were kept short. Here is one instance where I kept the same structure as Le Clézio:

<p>« .... il faisait chaud, il pleuvait, les chaussées étaient embouteillées, trop de monde sur les trottoirs, les cours étaient chiants, le prof de droit public ânonnait, son accent trainant, ses blagues à deux balles, sa façon de pencher la tête en lisant ses notes d’une voix monocorde, cet ennui qui flottait dans l’air comme une haleine lourde . . . » (Le Clézio 2011: 25)</p>	<p>“... it was hot, it was raining, the roads were congested, the sidewalks were too crowded, classes were damn boring, the public law teacher droned on, with his drawl, with his pathetic jokes, with his way of tilting his head while reading his notes monotonously, and the boredom that hung in the air like a permeated breath...”(My translation)</p>
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I was reluctant to break the staccato rhythm so exquisitely created by the author through his skilful use of commas. I did my best to use the exact same amount of commas—nine, avoiding the “destruction of rhythms” which may occur when the translator resorts to the deformation of word order and punctuation (Munday 2013: 150).

## b. Figurative Language

Le Clézio's stories are full of images and 'sourcerers' advocate that the translator has to work towards preserving the imagery. As Boase-Beier puts it, the translator has "to try, in the target text, to make choices potentially able to give rise to effects on target-text readers which reflect the potential effects of the source text on its readers" (2006: 51). In the light of this statement, we found that the only way to achieve this "effect" was with a literal translation, almost word-for-word. Throughout *Histoire du pied*, the foot is personified. It is not part of the body anymore; it takes on a life of its own. Le Clézio's personification of the foot also makes it a strong character: "Mais le pied lui ne s'abandonne pas. Debout, face au vent et à la mer..." (Le Clézio 2011: 12). We can even say that it is one of the main characters of the story. It symbolizes Ujine herself. Ujine's life story evolves with the story of the foot. Just like the foot overcomes its weaknesses—from being flat-footed to dancing and being free, Ujine overcomes all the hardships that she encounters one by one.

« Au repos, allongée, ou bien debout, reposant à la verticale au soleil, non loin de la mer. » (Le Clézio 2011: 11)	“At rest, stretched out, or upright—lying vertically facing the sun, not far from the ocean.” (My translation)
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Taken out of context, it is hard to imagine that the author could be describing a foot here. Everything in the description indicates that he is referring to a person who is sunbathing at the beach. Such is the importance of the foot in the story and particular care must be taken in the rendering to retain this concept of 'an ode to the foot', as Le Clézio intended. Hence, I found that keeping my translation very close to the source text worked better at recreating the personification of the foot in these different instances.

However, I found that following the source text closely in order to preserve the imagery was not always an easy task:

« ... mais <b>le souffle</b> du vent du large, <b>le souffle</b> venu des profondeurs de l’horizon et remontant la côte au moment de la marée, et glissant sur la jeune femme en bikini, »	“...but the open sea breeze, rising from the depths of the horizon and blowing back up the coastline during high tide—the breeze gliding over the bikini-clad young woman,”
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Here, we can imagine “le souffle” (“the breeze”) to be a gentle lover, slowly caressing his beloved. It is the embodiment of sensuality and takes on a life of its own. I first tried to translate this so as to achieve the same effect as in the source text and prevent the powerful imagery from being lost. However, when I was unable to follow the lexical repetition of « le souffle » as closely as in « mais **le souffle**<sup>5</sup> du vent du large, **le souffle**<sup>6</sup> venu des profondeurs de l’horizon », I felt that I did not quite reproduce the original effect as in the source text. Some of the intended intensity was lost. However, this loss was compensated for and created a stylistically different target text. Hence, I agree with Baker when she says that compensation is sometimes inevitable and it is a technique for dealing with “any loss of stylistic effect which may not be possible to reproduce directly at a given point in the target text” (2000: 78).

### c. Diction

As a result of having been in contact with multiple languages since an early age, the author sprinkles *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* with English, Spanish, Hindi and even Bhojpuri words and sayings, foregrounded in order to give them prominence through the use of italics. I was faced with two choices—either translate these and run the risk of losing the foreign flavour of the text, or leave them as they are. I opted to leave all of them as they are in order to preserve the author’s exotic touch and “to retain or recapture as much as possible of the original sensation, the original impulse (Anderson 1997: 699). But for the sake of the target readership, I added the translations as footnotes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Highlighted to illustrate my point.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Excerpts taken from the translation of the rest of the collection of stories not featured in my thesis.

Also, in her article, Alison Anderson recounts how while working on *Onitsha*, she encountered one of the “thorniest problems” (1997: 699) when trying to translate the word “varangue”, which appears at least a dozen times in the source text. She could not find any documented translation anywhere. A few days later, on board a flight to Mauritius, she found a restaurant recommended to visitor called Varangue sur Morne. She explains:

“And on arrival, as I asked around, I learned that “varangue” did in fact mean veranda, and was the usual word in Franco-Mauricien, perhaps even in Creole. Le Clézio would have heard this word throughout his childhood, as he is of Franco-Mauritian background. Sometimes a translator has to travel halfway round the world to find out something that is second nature to the author.” (1997: 699)

After studying Le Clézio’s diction in *Histoire du pied at autres fantaisies*, I found his diction at times to be just that—“second nature” to him. Often times, his choice of words is influenced by his own life experiences. He has stated more than once that he regards himself both as a Frenchman and a Mauritian and calls Mauritius his “little fatherland”. Mauritius is a multicultural island where several languages are used including Mauritian Creole, Hindi and Bhojpuri. Mauritian Creole, the lingua franca of Mauritius, is a French-based Creole due to its close ties with French pronunciation and vocabulary.

**Examples in Mauritian Creole:**

“... zistoir Marie, zistoir Puja, Madame!” (224)	« ...Marie’s story, Puja’s story, Ma’am!”
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« Touyé. » (230)	“Kill.”
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**Examples in Bhojpuri**, which is an amalgamation of several Indian languages spoken by the early Indian settlers on Mauritius, are:

“... ist aspara <sup>8</sup> kota sari, tohre raasta taakat rahli » (233)	«... oh female spirit wrapped in the clouds, you have rendered the path clear before me”
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« Dada » (131)	“Grandfather”
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Le Clézio completed part of his military service in Mexico and later lived with the Embera-Wounaan tribe in Panama, allowing him to perfect his Spanish.

**Spanish examples** taken from *Barsa ou barsaq*:

“... maricon, covarde, bastardo!”	“...fagot, coward, bastard!”
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“Cielo empireo”.	“Empirean sky.”
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Le Clézio studied English at Bristol University and also spent part of his childhood in Nigeria and Mauritius, two countries where English is the official language. Things get a tad complicated when translating into English as Le Clézio often uses English itself in *Histoire du pied*: “Fuck a duck and learn to fly” (44), “Assets and Liabilities” (52), “this little piggy” (72). In all these instances also, I chose to leave the English untouched even if it meant that the emphasis intended by the author is lost given that I was translating into English itself.

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<sup>8</sup> I believe that the correct Bhojpuri word here should be ‘apsara’ instead of ‘aspara’.

### 3.3 ‘Deforming’ Le Clezio’s Diction through ‘Expansion’ and ‘Clarification’

For Anderson, in *Onitsha*, Le Clézio’s language is “fluid and evocative, not too difficult, clear and classical” (1997: 682). In a similar line, I found Le Clézio’s style in *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* poetically simple, so simple at times that the author effortlessly and purposefully omits words without disrupting the flow of the story as in the following examples:

Example 1:

« Et Ujine courait, toutes affaires cessantes, bus, métro et, quand le temps manquait, taxi. » (Le Clézio 55)	“And Ujine would run, dropping everything. She would either <b>hop</b> on <sup>9</sup> a bus or the metro and when she was pressed for time, she would even <b>take</b> a taxi.”
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Example 2:

«La douleur depuis des jours.» (88)	“The pain <b>lingered</b> <sup>10</sup> for days.”
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Berman states that target texts tend to be longer than source texts. He claims that this is due to empty explicitation that unshapes the rhythm, to overtranslation and to “flattening” (2000: 290). For him, these additions only serve to reduce the clarity of the work’s “voice” (2000: 290). Clarification in Berman’s article refers to the willingness “to render ‘clear’ that which does not wish to be clear in the original” (2000: 289). In many instances in my translation of *Histoire du pied*, my “clarification” automatically led to “expansion”. In the first example, the fact that the number of words almost doubled in my translation is noteworthy. In both cases, I found my options more suitable than word-for-word translations as I consciously chose to use the verbs “to

<sup>9</sup> Addition of verb in target text.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

hop”, “to take” and “to linger” that were inferred in the source text. While I found that this did lead to “flattening” (Berman 2000: 289), I chose not to bypass it.

### 3.4 Lexical Repetition

The author’s diction is also characterized by his art of repeating words without falling into awkwardness. In numerous instances in the text, Le Clézio’s resorts to repetition of words within the same paragraph and even at times, within the same sentence:

<p>« Je dirais que le type qui s’amuse à des choses comme ça est un <b>malade</b> mental, et je m’en irais le plus loin possible ». C’était donc ça, Tout bonnement, un <b>malade</b>, Ujine a été la proie d’un <b>malade</b>. Elle en est devenue un peu <b>malade</b> à son tour. (Le Clézio 72)</p>	<p>“I would say that a guy who amuses himself like that is a <b>psycho</b><sup>11</sup> and I would flee as far away as possible”. That’s what it was then: he was quite simply a <b>madman</b>. Ujine had fallen prey to a <b>madman</b> and in the process, she had turned a little <b>mad</b> herself. (My translation)</p>
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Clifford E. Landers words came to mind when I had to deal with the repetition of “malade”:

“In English prosody, the tradition is not to repeat a word in the same sentence, or if possible, even the same (short) paragraph but in many languages even the best writers utilize the same word with a frequency that in the United States would have Elementary Composition instructors sharpening their blue pencils. A translator faces the problem of whether to reproduce this, honoring the author’s style, or to shape a more readable English. Ultimately, it’s a case by case decision” (Landers 2001: 133).

In this case, the deliberate repetition of the word “malade” four times is done for emphasis. At first I wanted to replicate this emphasis and retain all the intensity by choosing a single English word for “malade”. The first word that jumped to my mind was “madman”. However, since the first part of the extract forms part of a dialogue, I found the word “psycho” to better fit the register. And, it was also impossible to use “madman” for the last “malade” in this extract as,

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<sup>11</sup> Highlighted to illustrate my point.

unlike in French where “malade” is both a noun and an adjective, this is not the case in English. Hence, I had to use “mad”, which did not quite create the impact that the author intended.

## CHAPTER 4: TRANSLATION OF *HISTOIRE DU PIED*—*THE STORY OF FOOT*

### One

A flat surface—flabby and curved in the middle and yet not totally hollow.

A little furrowed.

At rest, stretched out, or upright—lying vertically facing the sun, not far from the ocean. What makes all five toes of each foot curl up? No, not really curl up but rather tighten, arch upwards, outspread—like a fan, as they say. The thought of the cold, no doubt. With the sea moving in waves engulfing the beach, not the sound of the ocean (can the feet hear?) but the open sea breeze, rising from the depths of the horizon and blowing back up the coastline during high tide—the breeze gliding over the bikini-clad young woman causing each and every hair along the thigh to bristle, caressing with a cold hand the skin, the belly button adorned with a green piercing, the breasts held by the triangular cup bras, making its way to face thrown back, abandoned, with eyes rolled upwards behind closed lids. Fluttering hair strands tangled up to completely hide the face, with a wild strand breaking free from the others, swinging from one cheek to the other over the bridge of the nose, between the eyes.

But the foot, it didn't give in. Erect, facing the wind and the ocean, as if watching, as if resisting. Against what, against whom? All the muscles and all the tendons were ready and taut, not relaxed. The softness of the sole was visible. The nerves were drawn inside and the ossicles and the cartilages were in their place. No rest. No sleep.

It was a long story. It all began twenty-six years ago, when Ujine came into this world—still tender, as if floating in water with the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands all crumpled and red. She had very supple toes, which her mother had immediately counted to make sure that there were none missing or one too many. There was the big toe on which Ujine sucked on to drop off to sleep, with the leg flexed until it reached her face and arms around her thighs, like some kind of pink-fleshed coil—warm and soft, very ardent and alive. It was a long time

ago. Now, Ujine had forgotten what her big toe tasted like. It had become distant and unfamiliar. Different. With barely a recollection—that of her mother who once told her:

“You looked like Bala Rama, Krishna’s brother, who would suck on his toe while sitting on his lotus leaf which floated on the river waters.”

Her mother was now gone. Her memory took her back to a time that did not exist. This was called loneliness, no doubt.

To find out, she asked Marc, her boyfriend, to take her big toe in his mouth.

“What does it taste like?”

Marc was in love. He liked strange stories and escaped from the ordinary

“It tastes like milk” he said, after a moment’s thought. There were sparks of laughter in his eyes. He wanted to taste each and every inch of her body but Ujine shrank away. She took back her toe.

“You pervert” she said.

But she didn’t want to explain why.

“*You* asked me to do it”

Ujine covered his mouth with her hand.

“Let’s kiss, it’s better!”

That’s what is called loneliness then—to be alone like a big toe. Of course, it is in the company of the other toes, of both feet but that does not make loneliness more bearable. Without seeing; without speaking. So far from the mouth. So far from the soul.

The earth. With the endless corridor of black and white terrazzo, leading to the concrete stairs. *Granito*. Something that had been discontinued a long time back, imported from Spain—tiny stone cubes in a spectrum of colours, lengthily polished with an electric grindstone to

achieve that smooth and cold surface. The bare feet curled up as a result. They formed arcs and walked on the sides or on the heels to flee the contact of that once spiked stone that was not totally smoothed by the polishing.

“But you walk like a penguin!”

“Ujine, stand straight, walk normally, for goodness sake!”

“This girl’s feet are flat. She will have to be taken to the orthopaedist.”

Flat feet—too long, sagging and lacking support. Boys’ feet. “Cows’ feet” said the girls at school. They had to be fixed, then, punished, locked up in metal-stemmed boots, trained and subjugated. One and two. One and two.

“On tiptoe, Ujine, on tiptoe!”

The varnished floorboard of the large dancehall was slippery and fine-grained. The pain pierces like a blade, forces the toes, tightens, burns the tendons and goes up the thighs, to the hips and to the groin.

“I can’t go on, Ma’am. It hurts too much.”

“There, there. No self-pity, Miss. One and two. One and two.”

And the dancing instructor’s long cane brushed against her bottom and her back, barely, lightly. The feet received the electric discharge which thrust them forward, made them leap and made them fly!

To run. Years after, to run. On the sandy beach, in Brittany—the *lieu de grève* as it is called, with the sand hardened by the wind and the low tide sea. To run faster and faster, jumping over the seaweeds and the gray patches of washed up jellyfish. To run further and further away—the feet fly on the beach, plunge in the puddles, splashing drops of salty and warm water all around.

“Ujine! U-jine, stop!”

To be free, at sixteen. To strike the ground, to dash and to fly for a few seconds. To dance, to leap; as if the ground returned the blows, here, anywhere. On the concrete sidewalks; on the asphalted roads. The plumpness under the toes—flexible and hard skin cushioning; the heels round like shingles, worn-out, yet very smooth, and the tendons sensitive under the skin—this obverse side of life, obverse side of the soul, continuously on the floor, perpetually in contact with the earth, supporting the burden of life. A ninety-two pound woman, in her work outfit, in her charcoal-grey three-piece suit, in the exhibition hall where she works as a receptionist for the Fashion or Horse Show, for the Pacemaker Exhibition, for the Medical Publishing Fair, for the Travel Agents Fair. . .

“You will have to wear stilettos.”

“Neither sneakers nor ballet slippers.”

“Closed shoes.”

There was laughter from the other girls and moaning as well.

“My feet, my poor feet!”

“They’re killing me!”

“I can’t feel them anymore.”

“It feels like I’m wearing clogs.”

And after that, the hot bath—soothing and softening to doze off and to forget. With toes erect in the depths of the tub; ten islets lingering in the sea of foam like a family of ducklings. Like in olden days with her mother’s small voice, counting again and again:

“One, two, three, four, five . . . and ten! And ten!” holding the last one, as if with pliers—the small pink end with its tiny pearly nail.

To move forward, always.

To stamp the floor with the shoe tip, and bear all the weight on the tiny heel. Training. The first time, it was long ago. Ujine was still little. She had put on her mother's shoes—too big, it felt like walking with boxes. She wanted to hear the sound, the clickety-clack on the living room floor, and the applause and the laughter from her mother, from Aunt Annie, from Grandpa Robert, from Grandpa Dany and from Uncle Jacques; their laughter, their comments:

“A real little woman!”

“And did you see how it makes her back arch!”

“It's amazing, she's instantly a little woman, with her back arched and her butt protruding!”

But the real first time, it was a long time after that, for a party, a wedding perhaps. It was in a large room with a varnished wood floor, a veranda and a garland-adorned winter garden with potted plants. The air was tinged with perfume. A band was playing somewhere—Trots, mambos and the cha-cha-cha. Ujine slipped on the hard leather stilettos. She was barefoot despite the cool spring.

It was the first time. She felt as if she was floating—bigger than most men, slimmer and taller. The heels must have been twelve centimeters high. Suddenly the floor was far away, light. At first, she touched the floor with the tip of her toes, waiting for the contact of the heels, very carefully, one then the other. She danced. Her feet were flying now, carried by the rhythm of the music. Her heels clattered on the floor, served as pivots. Everything had become easy and swift.

"You dance well, Miss. Do you often go night-clubbing?"

After that permission, she had gone every weekend, even every night during the holidays. The baccalaureate was far away. That was the urgent thing, the first priority, that adventure which began her real life, which turned her into a woman, a real woman—not a reserved and needy child anymore. No more tango nor trot. Instead there were violent and wild dances, with the bass guitar and drums reverberating in the background—a mechanical tempo, oppressive and tight, mimicking the heart's rhythm beating in the arteries. Blood pulsated from top to bottom, pressed by the tendons, by the calf and thigh muscles. The blood rushed to the head, so deep in the head, setting the cheeks ablaze and intoxicating the brain. But it was the blood that came

from the floor, from the phosphorescent dance floor; the blood that came from the soles of the feet, with the ground that snaked up and down and struck her feet and with the hidden music being unleashed by thuds within her whole body.

“You’re beautiful. You dance like a pro. You’re really a turn-on! Look, all the young men desire you when you dance!”

She was not listening. She did not want anyone to come up to her. In nightclubs, the young men would always come from behind, touching, even brushing against her. It was a little game—they would jerk off against her buttocks. She hated that. She would shove them off, her hand flat on their chest; she would feel the sweat soaking their T-shirts. They were lecherous and pathetic. They would move away for a moment like scared puppies, and then they would come back again.

Her legs were bare, with every muscle tense, her stomach flat and an apple-green piercing on her belly-button—the colour of her eyes. She would get home at four in the morning, worn-out, on edge and electric. She would throw herself onto the bed without even undressing with only four hours of sleep before class—Psychology tomorrow then Business English, some Math, anything. She was not even thinking about it. Her soles were free and painful, with the toes fanned out, the music still quivering, trembling within the core; an electric root which did not wither. And it glided, leaving her body through the heels’ hard skin, through the phalanges of the toes, and through the nails.

It was the year her mother had died of pancreatic cancer in the hospital--it hardly took three months. She had been buried in the small Villejuif cemetery, but as she had been of Buddhist faith, she had been cremated in a furnace first. Her father had left for a round the world trip. He had never returned.

Ujine could no longer do without. She could run, jump, walk, wait, perched on her five-inch heels, leaning on the tip of her toes. She could do anything, yes anything. Ben, her boyfriend at the time, made fun of her.

"How do you chicks keep your balance on these things?"

He, with his same old sneakers—red and white things like divers' boots. She was one head taller than him.

“This is what we do best, us chicks, as you say, didn't you know that?”

In the metro—late for classes as usual and late for work to welcome the CEOs, the perfume and cosmetics people at the airport's Ambassador Lounge. She would go down the stairs; she would climb them back two at a time, with the tip of the stairs obstructing her heels. She ran on the wet roads, between the pavements covered with cracks and on the stony ground of the road works. But she did not like soft carpets and sometimes she was trapped by the overflow grids, and gridded pavement areas were her foes. Employers forgave her; they liked her because of her Eurasian light hair and slanted eyes. She was thin as a rake and this suited the exhibitions; they said she wore black sheath dresses beautifully.

“Why do you think we hired you, huh? Because you're pretty, there! But that doesn't mean you don't have to be on time.”

Every morning—to get up, to set the soles of the foot on the cold tiles. After sleep (loving; dreaming).

"Hello!"

The amazement of the first touch. The toes curled up on the pavement. To walk.

"You walk on your heels!"

The words of that old girl—a spinster, no doubt. It was Ujine's first studio apartment, on the fifth floor, without any elevator. Freedom felt so good and intoxicating—not having to answer to anyone, not having to bear her brother's jibes and her father's criticisms. But the spinster on the fourth floor, just below, an Arts teacher—moody, badly dressed and sexually frustrated. She would wait behind the door, and when Ujine would pass by, she would call out to her. She would block Ujine's way with her skinny arm and she would touch her with her cold finger tips.

"Just a minute, Miss!"

She was a little scary despite her gauntness and small size, with her hair dyed in a reddish hue and her gray eyes which looked like cold sores.

“I would like to make a comment.”

It was years since Ujine had last felt intimidated by a teacher—she no doubt recalled Miss Doux, whose name was so ill-suited—nasty, crafty, vicious, with her poor grades, her blows given with a ruler, her claw-like fingers which would catch in the little girls’ hair strands, very slowly pulling them out. And Miss Doux would laugh upon hearing their tiny mouse-like squeaks: Hai! Hai! Hai!

“Miss, are you aware that you walk on your heels?”

Not waiting for an answer, she went on:

“Looking at you, Miss, one would think that you are light, a true sylph, with your wings, pfuii! Pfuii! But when you live below, it’s boom! Boom! You turn into an elephant! With heels forward I thump, I stomp, I have plows attached to my feet!”

Ujine had run away. She went down the stairs four at a time. The ramp shook and the high-pitched voice of Miss Doux followed and caught up with her:

“The heels! You walk on your heels! On your heels!”

So, Ujine had to live barefoot, even the beach mules made noise. To unfurl the foot’s sole, slowly, toes first, to gently press the heel—gently, g-ent-ly!

Love—it was unexpected and un hoped for.

She had met Samuel when she had lost all hope. It had not been easy. He did not frequent the same places as her, like the sushi bars, the clubs, and the restaurants. He did not dance. He did not like karaoke. He liked simple things, that’s what he claimed—the strolls along the river banks, on the towpaths. He liked the pool, but at night when there weren’t any children. He liked one swimming pool in particular, with a Belle Époque decor, tiled in green rather than blue, with its small loggias adorned with lotus flowers in mosaic. Delicately outdated.

It was where their first dates took place. She would never forget the contact with the green tiles—cold and wet, the viscous footbath and the steps of the half-moon stairs immersed in the fresh water. It was June, early summer. It was muggy and raining. Water streamed down the glass roof and the lights projected starry shadows on the concrete beams. There were nine stars. She had counted them while sliding on her back, everything muffled by the rubber bathing cap.

“It’s mandatory here,” Samuel had pointed out. “They are very strict about hygiene.”

Samuel respected all prohibitions and he followed rules to the letter. He was that kind of person. He was so thoughtful at first.

"Excuse me, Miss ..."

He apologized for everything—for taking her hand, for grazing her chest, for asking her personal questions, and for not answering her questions.

"Excuse me. I can't talk about that right now."

He had had a mistress at twenty: he had admitted, turning his gaze away.

"Maybe he's a fag?"

It had been Mado's remark, a friend from work. It had made them laugh. His feet were very large and very long. He was so tall, six feet? Ujine had always liked tall men—with long and slender feet and the middle toe bigger than the others: is this called the Egyptian foot? Ujine had immediately fallen in love with his feet. Obviously, he was not aware of that. Ujine would have died rather than admit to something so stupid, especially when she hated her own feet. She hated their shape--too flat, with their pale hue and their pudgy toes. She remembered the first time she had heard it. She had been with girls at summer camp on the river bank. It was hot; no one had a swimsuit on. She had rolled up her pants to let the cold water run over her legs. The monitor had arrived. She had told Ujine:

"So, Miss-with-the-big-toes?"

It had taken a few minutes for Ujine to understand, but it hadn't taken that long for it to sink in for the other girls. They kept saying over and over again:

"Miss-big-toes! Miss-big-toes!"

Why hadn't she forgotten? She had tried to struggle, had worn closed-toe sandals, ankle socks. She said that she never wore tap shoes—they hurt her and tore at her skin. So she took the habit of painting her nails bright red. Since I have big toes, it's best that they're seen right away! And also she didn't care anymore.

Samuel had apologized after the first kiss. He had apologized after their lovemaking. Instead of asking, like the others:

"Was it good?"

He had asked shyly:

"Did I hurt you?"

It was ridiculous, but Ujine had been moved. Everything was so different with him. Later, she had had this epiphany:

"But he has an artist's feet!"

Perhaps that explained everything, like what would be said of a pianist: it's normal, his hands are made for this. The idea had made her smile.

His skin was matt, brown and almost totally hairless. She loathed men who had hair all over their toes, their feet and their arms! It was inexcusable! This ridiculous idea of masculinity. Samuel, he was manly. He was very tall, very strong and very sweet—robust with thick legs, steady as a statue, slow and quiet. In a crowd, he towered by a head; he always leaned forward a little to listen. He did not talk much. He never lost his temper, except once, at his work at the bank, with a cantankerous deputy chief clerk who had taken a dislike to him and who was jealous and short-tempered. Samuel did not give a damn. Samuel ignored him; he only smirked, as if saying: "Go on, I'm not afraid of you!" The chap had been horrible to one of the office employees—a somewhat dim-witted girl. He had insulted her; the girl was crying, and Samuel had intervened.

"You can't talk to her like that!"

Right after that, he had been summoned to the deputy chief clerk's office. The latter was seated in his CEO chair, behind his huge desk. To Samuel, he had gestured towards a chair, not just any chair but a very low chair—a stool, almost level with the floor. Not complying, Samuel had remained standing, and in the end the deputy chief clerk had lost his composure. He had walked up to him threateningly, with his small arms slightly apart and with this weird twitch in his shoulders, as if he was trying to look taller. Standing on his small feet, despite his heels, his head barely reached Samuel's chest. He had mumbled a few sentences; he had not known what to say anymore. In the end, he had said:

“That will be all for now”.

With a triumphant smile and a little conceitedly, Samuel had told Ujine what had happened. It was funny, she thought, to see him so blatantly proud, as if being tall made him superior, as if it was thanks to him. At the same time, she felt relieved to be with him, with someone so tall, who was not afraid of anyone. Someone who was so simple. She was so tiny, so weak; even her head seemed too heavy for her to carry! All the same, she could not refrain from teasing him:

“How romantic! A gentleman who stands up for a poor young woman in a bank!”

She added:

“She was cute, at least?”

Samuel shot her one of his chilling looks, implying he disliked the mockery. But she snuggled against him; she rested her head on the wide chest.

“Come on, I'm kidding, I'm very proud of you”.

He grumbled:

"That's not what I . . . for God's sake; you're getting on my nerves!"

But she was listening to his heartbeat, slow and deep strokes. Next to this big heart, hers seemed restless as a bell. She even thought: this heart belongs to me, it beats for me, but it was

not something she could tell him. He would not have liked to hear that; he wanted people to believe that he belonged to nobody.

She was lighter. She had never imagined such a thing. She walked in the streets upon leaving law school. Everyone was complaining about something or the other—it was hot, it was raining, the roads were congested, the sidewalks were too crowded, classes were damn boring, the public law teacher droned on, with his drawl, with his pathetic jokes, with his way of tilting his head while reading his notes monotonously, and the boredom that hung in the air like a permeated breath. . . . And Ujine, she wanted to run, to dance.

“What’s going on with you? You’re in really good shape”.

Her friend Micha looked at her wryly. Wasn’t that ridiculous? All this for a young man that she hadn’t even known for more than six months, who had entered her life and caught her off guard, and nothing was the same anymore? There was no boredom and no sadness anymore? She wanted to reason with herself.

“No, it’s just the blessedness of being alive, nothing else.”

“That’s original, it’s new! So, there’s no death, there’s no sickness, all is well in the world?”

“Just a momentary lapse, let’s say, an interlude, a mood swing.”

“A self-centered bliss then?”

“If you like, one has to be stupid to not be selfish.”

There was no rationalizing when it came to this. The floor would become springy, bouncy, as if made up of millions of tiny springs, millions of bubbles, her joints heated?, the electric current pulsing through her body, making its way through her thighs and her arms. When she walked, she would open and close her phalanges to breathe in her freedom; she would smile to people and they would think she was crazy.

She was surprised. So, that's what love was? Like a halo hovering over her head and like an invisible armour—she felt safe, in the heart, she felt invincible. Fluid—she danced.

She went to her dates with no ulterior motive. Samuel wasn't looking for anything serious and definite. He would say:

“Ok, I'll call you, then?”

But he had never given her his phone number. He said that he did not own a cellphone—he could only be reached at work, at the bank, but calling him there was out of the question. He was probably hiding behind his work and behind his parents. He had discussed his mother a little with Ujine—a frail woman, he was the only one that she had since his father fell sick. They lived in the same building and on the same floor. When he was late in the evening, she would call the police and the hospitals. It was kind of ridiculous—he was thirty-five but at the same time Ujine was moved by his filial love. She had nobody—her mother had passed away, her father was miles from anywhere and her brother was somewhere but unconcerned. That was probably why she felt so light and so free. Love was like a violent gust and she was all free to reverberate like a grass harp, turn like a windmill, and feel that movement that had been triggered at the core of her being, a dizzy spell in her stomach, a pivot which quivered while spinning upon itself. That is why the ground was flexible, under her feet—sonorous and tense, without any crease and without any hollow.

People paid attention to her, now, in the streets—at work, at college, in the stores; she could feel that she caught their attention. Some time back, she would have felt ashamed. She would have tried to find out what was wrong, she would have hidden behind her hair or she would have pulled her cap down over her face. But now, she would run to her date with Samuel, or she would just think about him very hard and the gazes would glide over her. She felt under the protection of an aura, inside a centre of light. She could see the loved one's face, the brightness of his gaze, the line defining his eyebrows and his nose and the perfect rim of his lips.

She did not even have to get ready. She was always ready, and when her phone vibrated, the small face would light up—unknown number. She knew it was Samuel—she would run to rue de la Banque, to the bistro on the other side, with its everyday regulars—old drivelling fools and youngsters dazed by video games. She would wait and he would show up. He would come

in, look around for her and this would make her smile as he would not recognize her—he was the only one not to notice her. She had to stand up and wave. He would drink a black coffee quickly and afterwards they would leave together for her place. He didn't want to be seen walking with her, he remained in the background a little—silent. She thought about how much she would have liked him to hold her hand, embrace her. But he had imposed his rules:

“This is my work neighbourhood. I hate malicious gossip and the kind, you understand?”

At first, she had been annoyed and she had wanted to reply harshly:

“You're ashamed?”

She had probably even said so but he never caved in. She liked the fact that he had rules, the fact that he did not go with the flow like the other young men—she saw it as a game. Besides, it was what he had told her, one day, like a compliment:

“You're good at my game.”

Without understanding why, she had been glad.

It was a whirlwind that carried her away. She enjoyed the motion so much that she did not feel the loss of her freedom. Nothing mattered anymore—neither honour nor self-esteem. Next to this emotion, only vanity remained.

For a brief moment, her mind would get clouded because of an unkind comment, a missed date, a cold silence or a trivia. But her body and her heart did not stop at that—her feet flew, took her in leaping steps to rue de la Banque, to the bistro on the other side. She would go all the distance from college to the other side of town without fatigue, without catching her breath, without feeling the weight of the books in her shoulder strap bag; oblivious to the cold, the rain, and thirst. Her cellphone had vibrated thrice and then had stopped, and this little ungracious noise opened up a draft within her body, propelling the windmill's wings.

At the bistro, certain days, Samuel would choose his meal. He would read the grimy menu carefully—a tuna salad, an apple pie, an always extra-strong coffee. He would look inquiringly at Ujine, as if he couldn't recall. But she wasn't hungry, wasn't thirsty. She thrived by observing him; she ate and drank of him, of the halo enveloping him, of the electricity that

glimmered in his body, of the sparks in his black strands—all that everyone, except Samuel, understood. Until she felt nauseous.

If she happened to say:

“I feel kind of sick”,

He would take it at face value:

“So would you prefer to go home and rest?”

She would pull herself together:

“No, no, I’ll be fine.”

The thought that he could leave had made her dizzy.

Ujine had done something that she had never thought herself capable of. She had gone to the hotel with Samuel several times. It was dingy and rotten. But he had seemed to like that. He had said:

“I can’t go to your place.”

Ujine had not asked why. He would not have replied anyway. He probably behaved like that for her to understand that there was no answer.

He was different during their lovemaking. He was affectionate, gentle and kind. She loved watching his tall naked body, his matt skin—mixed-race like hers. She would sniff his skin. That smell—it seemed she had known it all her life, had craved it. She permeated herself with it to keep it with her when they were apart, to still feel his presence, to be imbued with it. Even in the dingy hotel rooms (with the large mirror in front of the bed, the condom slot machine, the cheap cosmetic kit, the soaps, the creams, the Vaseline, the tissue and the TV set hooked on the adult channels), she captured brilliance, light and beauty, for the days and weeks to come and to prepare for a long journey without him.

Then life was light and adventurous. Ujine (Samuel called her “Jeans” because she was dressed in them most of the time—a pair of jeans, a white men’s shirt, high heels and he had

once told her that, for a man, this was the most exciting feminine outfit) was changing looks and was changing blood. She had realised that her feet were warming up—the same feet which usually were two icy blocks. She had pointed this out to him:

“My feet aren’t cold anymore! Feel them.”

It hadn’t seemed extraordinary to him.

“Me neither!”

“But your feet are always warm. Men’s feet are always warm and women’s feet are always cold. Didn’t you know that?”

He shrugged:

“Nonsense! I know women with warm feet.”

She had interrupted him:

“Oh yes? And who would these women be? Please do tell me?”

She pretended to laugh, to be vexed, but in fact, each time, she felt a lump in her throat, an anxiety, which wrenched her out of her illusion, dragged her back to the harsh reality and to loneliness. So that was jealousy? How ridiculous!

But their feet were tangled up, and when he placed his large sole inside her thighs, she would quiver with pleasure.

Certain moments were overwhelmingly long. One night, they had made love—he had done so hungrily, even a little violently. He wanted to touch and taste every parcel of her body, silently, to run his swollen penis, with its pulled back foreskin, over it. And after he had come outside of her—for some time now he had ceased wearing a condom—he would fall asleep immediately, his mouth pointing upwards. He would even snore a little because of his big nose. Ujine would have loathed him. But she gave in to sleep, curled up next to his large body, to capture his warmth, trap it deep within her—this was her nourishment and her inspiration. And when she opened her eyes, the very first thing she would do was to feel the space next to her in

the bed to check whether Samuel was still there. Without even opening her eyes, she would seek him out—she would place her arm on his chest and drift back to sleep.

And in the light of dawn, they remained stretched out on the mattress, motionless and quiet. He was sleeping while she was half-awake. Their feet rested—Samuel’s on the side with the arch crumpled and the toes spread out while Ujine’s feet were erect, freed from the bed sheet, with her toes upright to better grasp daylight’s stroke and to clinch the surprise of dreams. Nothing in the world could disturb the lovers; nothing could disrupt their rest. It was a time wrung out of infinity, without thoughts and without wisdom. Outside, in the streets and in the avenues around the hotel’s façade of white stucco, the rumblings resumed. The garbage trucks slammed their jaws, with the puffing and panting buses releasing compressed air, with the scraping, the squealing, and the banging. And on their room’s ceiling, like a reflection in water, there was the flashing of the reversing lights, and gradually there was a mild sound, released from the earth, through the air vents—the distant sound from the first suburbanites entering the city, with the blind cars groping their way, looking for parking spaces. Far way, even further away, unreal, a song probably, or a prayer or a radio set which came back to life in a kitchen, all by itself, to give the time. But on the mattress, the feet were still motionless for some time, calm, somewhat majestic, white like marble sculptures, so close to death.

## Two

She never got enough. She was constantly alert and ready for anything.

“He’s pushing you around?” had commented her friend Rita after classes

It had made her laugh.

“Precisely” had thought Ujine, “That was it, that was very precisely it”.

Samuel was pushing her around. She covered miles every day in order to piece together all the fragments of her life—from her place to Law School, from school to rue de la Banque, then to the hotel (most often the one called Merbeau, no one could have guessed why). Then, when Samuel was back to his parents’ house, she would walk the streets aimlessly, wherever her wandering footsteps would take her, further off, to impossible, unimaginable neighbourhoods, disaster areas—gloomy and danger-filled. But Ujine wasn’t afraid of anything; she just needed to be in the open, to avoid staying in one place and to walk in the night dappled with neon lights and flashes.

That summer, she felt something strange and unfamiliar—a growing emptiness, which was taking root within her. It was strange as she had known for a few days now that she was pregnant. She even knew exactly how it had happened—they had gone to the countryside by car, very far away, through a dirt road amidst fields of wild grasses and while the sun was setting, they had made love in the car. She had realized that she had forgotten her condom box—he never brought any. And when he had spilled himself inside her, she had had a new sensation, a kind of certainty, immediately followed by anxiety--she had felt a shiver run down from her nape to her soles. Later on, she had wanted to share that with him but she had not known how; she didn’t even know how these things are said, something like:

“Oh, by the way, don’t you know? I’m having a baby.”

Or, with feigned cheerfulness:

“Darling, I’m *so* happy! . . .”

Perhaps dramatically:

“Do you love me? I really need you to love me . . .”

She was worn-out. Once outside in the street, she would stagger. She would lean against walls, dizzy. Her feet would part slightly as if they knew that Ujine already had to carry extra weight—they would stand very flat on the ground, splay-footed as they say. And Ujine had had to replace her high heels with flats, tennis shoes, and mostly flip-flops. She needed to feel the earth under her feet, firm and sturdy.

Meanwhile, she had stopped smoking, without having given it any thought. Samuel was surprised:

“Oh really! Why did you decide to do that?”

He would go on and calmly light his cigarettes—he did not really want to hear her explanations. She could have jumped at the chance and given him the reason, but she did not, perhaps because he could not care less whether she smoked or not. She tried:

“Wouldn’t you like to stop with me for a while? It would help me keep to it.”

He replied:

“Why would I stop? I enjoy smoking and I don’t give a shit if I die.”

And on the same subject, he would sometimes repeat:

“To quit drinking, to quit smoking and die hale and hearty!”

Ujine felt abandoned.

“And to please me?”

All the same, she knew quite well what Samuel’s response would be—his same old pessimistic motto:

“We are born alone and we die alone; we sleep alone—that’s the only thing we are certain of!”

She was so tired. She had confided in Charlotte, a college friend she had run into.

“The only thing that I would like is to be someone else.”

The girl had stared at her blankly. Ujine had not dared to go on; it was too private. The Ob-Gyn on the other hand, had not beaten about the bush:

“You are still less than three months along. We can stop if that’s what you want.”

It was very simple indeed. She only had to say yes and to make an appointment at the clinic. Why she did not do it, she didn’t have a clue. Perhaps it was fatigue, perhaps solitude; or the need to go further out of curiosity, to go for once to the end, since it depended on her and on nobody else.

Her steps would take her daily to rue de la Banque, out of habit. She would wait for the moment when Samuel would come out of the office, between two appointments—looking weary, with his tie in a coil and two sweat stains on his shirt, under the arms. She would wait for his colleagues to leave, and wait at the curb for him to join her. She would listen to him complain, she would hang on to each and every sentence; the words would echo two or three times in her mind. She thought she was like those married women who welcome their husbands on the doorstep, in order to hear what happened at work. She knew that she would listen to him when he was no longer there—she would lie alone in her bed and she would go over the snatches of conversation in her head.

“...I’m sick of all this, I’m sick of their faces, of their hairstyles...you know. Earlier, I was looking at the guy seated right in front of me at the office, who has his back to me and I was looking at his neck ... He is already losing his hair and he is not even forty. I was thinking that I would end up like him in a few years. I’ll get eaten up by boredom—I’ll be finished, stuck in the same rut every day; doing the same things every day.”

But why? Ujine made up the answers and the objections—everything she had not dared tell him. All this is nothing, nothing at all. It’s trivial—a ripple at the surface of life. It’s not even worth the trouble to talk about it; it’s nothing when you share everything else, when you know what is real and what is beautiful in life, with every passing second. There is no boredom, no routine—if you live with someone, you share all this and you are not alone, never alone; it is a moment in life, a huge moment ...

Why was she expecting so much? As for him, he did not even look at her. He would drink his espresso, with his cigarette burning between his fingers. The hot wind blew the smoke towards the sky. He would watch the smoke; his eyes would follow it. She wanted to smile, say something funny and clever like she used to--those witty little words and puns which twinkled like fireflies and attracted friends, college girls, adventurous flirts she sent packing. But now she felt a knot in her throat and in her mind and emptiness in her belly. It was because of the child—it was settling in and it drained her of all energy. She would sit on her bed, watching the night come through the slats of the blinds. She felt tears run down her cheeks and wet her pillow—she did not know where all that water was coming from.

One evening, Ujine did something irreparable. Samuel had left. He had been sent by the bank on some business abroad. He had only left a message on her phone—a few words. As usual. Words are only there for communicating. Actions are preferable, he would say—to live in the moment. A farewell before leaving: pretend I'll never come back. Freedom is best.

Then after days of waiting for nothing and for no one, Ujine snapped out of her numbness. It was very hot and thunderstorms whirled around the city. There was the distant sound of engines and thunder and the vibration of the underground trains.

Now she felt impatience and need. No more words, action. Samuel had said so. I have to act as if he will never come back--just like looking, from the back of a train, at the countryside unfolding itself in reverse. This tree, this house, these kids, this dog, I see them and I will never see them again. She would not look for excuses. There was a vacuum to fill, a bubble that swelled--full of reflections and mirages.

Ujine had dressed up for the first time in days, as if to attend a business appointment. It was the style that Samuel liked—gray skirt suit, white shirt and high heels. She had cut her bangs, put on the pink coral loop earrings that Samuel had given her for her birthday, with red matching lipstick and a touch of scent on her neck. The mirror had given back the image of a pretty and daring girl, with her almond eyes, her full lower lip and the bright pearl-coloured incisors. She recalled the first time Samuel had presented her to his colleagues from the bank—a tall woman, in her fifties, who had looked her over:

“My, my, isn’t she lovely? Is she an actress?”

Just because of that Samuel didn’t want to have another such encounter again. He hated such comments and he had replied:

“No. No. She’s just a student, that’s all.”

He had later said:

“An actress, yeah right? Do I date actresses? I’m a small bank employee, I lead an ordinary life.”

But Ujine loved making him jealous. That he could be jealous made her laugh.

In the metro towards the airport, people were watching her a little slyly. The women scrutinized her clothes, commented on her electric blue shoes, on her purse and on her earrings. A man, a tired looking man in his forties, somewhat a dandy, was staring at her—she felt his eyes slide down her body, her breasts, her stomach, and her feet and then go up and down again. She thought about going up to him and saying harshly:

“So are you satisfied? You want me to move a little, spin around?”

But it also felt good to be nothing but an image—to be empty inside. No more anguish and no more swelling bubble.

Ujine remained standing throughout the remaining fourteen stations to the terminal.

Once in the lobby, she realised that it was hopeless. The crowds, the lights, the line-up at the ticket counters—the situation was beyond her control. She knew the date; he would be coming back that evening. Nothing else. Samuel never revealed where he was heading; he loathed to be accompanied and to be picked up. He always said:

“Trips are difficult; farewells ridiculous.”

He had a take on everything. He also said:

“To leave and never return, that would be perfect.”

Ujine loved airports. For her, who never travelled, it was a place where one had already left even before leaving. She loved the hubbub, the incomprehensible announcements preceded by a bell, the distant thunderous taking off of aircrafts which shook the floor and windows, the disoriented look of those who were leaving, the baffled ones of those left behind and the weariness of those coming back. Everything that Samuel loathed. He spoke of it as organized hell. He, what he loved was to stay at home reading a book, or to speed through the fields on a motorcycle on winding mountain roads. He never said where he was going. He had once remarked:

“I want to die on a motorcycle like Lawrence of Arabia.”

And all these countries, all these cities with their names displayed on monitors—Seoul, Tokyo, Osaka, Guam, San Francisco, Denver, Rome, Berlin, Abu Dhabi, Bangkok, Angkor, Manila, Mauritius, Mexico. It was as if Samuel went everywhere. Ujine ran right and then left, towards the arrival gates—she tried to catch sight of the faces, to recognize a stature, a garment, a hair colour, a gait. She had bought a writing pad and a marker at the newsstand. She wanted to write a name in big letters, not Samuel of course, he would never forgive her, a name, any name, a word he would see from afar and recognize—MERBEAU, the name of the hotel they frequented, or MILES DAVIS, because he liked him, or WINGS, because he sometimes took her there for a sandwich after work. But her hand was unable to write—she trembled as if it were a momentous decision. Then, her feet would lead her from one end of the terminal to the other. She listened to the sound of her heels slamming on the floor—clack, clack, clack. It echoed in her head and in her body. It made her feel dizzy but her feet could not stop anymore. They had to walk, go faster than everyone in order not to miss a moment, an arrival of passengers.

The afternoon went by, then the evening. Through the large windows of the Terminal, Ujine saw the night fall, the pink streetlights come on, and the headlights of the cars which glided regularly along the sidewalk, slowed down, poured people out, took off again, signalling with breaks and position lights and turn signals--some fast, tic tic tic, others slow and heavy—kitong, kitong, kitong. The air-conditioned buses, the shuttles and the maintenance trucks drove by. Sometimes a police car passed, very slow and suspicious, grazing the sidewalk like a shark.

To fight fatigue, Ujine seated herself at the bar, not far from a control door. She drank very hot green tea from a paper cup, in small gulps. The waitress had spoken to her—something concerning food or perhaps more hot water for the tea? Ujine looked at her, clueless. She must have looked so lost that the woman had said softly, like someone sympathizing or pitying:

“Are you ok, Ma’am?”

She had replied vaguely, gesturing with her hand. She had mumbled:

“Yes, yes. Everything’s fine.”

At that moment, she did not know why she was there anymore. Her feet were so swollen that she had taken her shoes off and placed her purse on the chair next to her. The people at the next table were noisy—a somewhat obese family. The man and the woman were quarrelling, about money or something else, and the fourteen or fifteen year-old boy, already as fat as his parents, was looking at Ujine slyly, with a sarcastic fold to his swollen mouth. Then there had been raised voices, as if these people would fight like cats and dogs, and the waitress had stopped to watch. Then the couple made up; they even kissed. It was pathetic and somewhat disgusting, and the family eventually left. And then the café was empty again, as it had to be late at night, and there were *fewer* passengers. There were a few stragglers—running after their luggage carts, pulling their suitcases with one runaway wheel writhing on the floor, making the tac tac sound of a machine gun, a kind of ghost train zigzagging between obstacles, spinning towards the dark doors. Ujine rested her head on her folded arms on the table tray. The tea had been cool for quite a while now; silence was spreading through the terminal and Ujine clearly heard the crackling of the ceiling’s neon lights.

Then there was no one in the lobby. On the café terrace, the waitress was piling up chairs, wiping the counter, tying up garbage bags full of soda cans and sandwich cartons. Now and then, she would cast a glance at Ujine, seemingly saying: “I get you, I am familiar with your sorrow, he won’t come tonight....”

A song melody: *Let it snow...* Had she whistled it as she was sweeping? Ujine had hated her fake sympathy, that thing between women—was she asking for anything? Did she have anything in common with this waitress—humiliated, doleful, this eternal victim crystallized in

her submission to men, unable to extricate herself from it, unable to feel anything except guilt? Her wickedness made her dizzy. Yes, I love a man, he is worthless but I am the only one responsible. My heart aches and so does my stomach, my legs feel like jelly and it is ridiculous—it's my stuttering, my slipping on a banana peel, on dog poop. I tumble but I know how to laugh about it, while you... Ujine gathered her strength, she got up, she donned her shoes, she even stretched to show that she'd been really bored and had fallen half asleep. She pushed back the chair; she walked away slowly with her bag over her shoulder. She was certain the waitress was staring at her, gazing at her back. She should not stumble, not show any weakness. She headed towards the door and went out.

Outside, in the night, it was the emptiness that engulfed her. The wind blew and the sky was impenetrable--an imaginary pink.

At the top of the tower, it was still hot despite the season. Ujine felt the hair on her arms, legs and back stand up, and an icy sting in her armpits. She arrived like an automaton, she felt as if it was her feet that brought her there, with the heels of her pumps blocked at the risers of the concrete staircase echoing with a metallic sound.

The hotel was very high—thirty-three floors with the roof terrace at the top. The concierge at the reception did not pose any problem. With her gray suit, her purse, her high heels, the man believed he had recognized a familiar silhouette. While taking the imprint of the credit card, he had said:

“...a good night's rest after a long flight...”

Ujine smiled—the smile she thought was most worthy of a stewardess. Samuel liked to make her jealous by telling her about his flings with stewardesses—that was all he brought back from his travels to New York, Abu Dhabi and Tokyo. In midair. *Fuck a duck and learn to fly!* She had chuckled while panting because of the overly steep steps.

The stairs led to the roof; she had had to push the metal door against the wind—a whip of fresh air contrasting with the stuffy atmosphere of the stairwell. Smells, plenty of smells, like in a forest. Ujine did not expect the smells—she tried to decipher them: hot tar, engine airplane

kerosene of course, and also the smell of the sea, very distant, mixed with the Eulalie fields of the countryside and the heavy and sweet smell of swamp.

Ujine had calmly taken out all the bottles from her purse—small flasks of alcohol, from the hotel room fridge, samples rather, enough to fill a glass. Vodka, gin, Kahlua, green and yellow liqueurs, white alcohol in bulging green bottles, sake, soju, that she swallowed in a gulp, because it was pleasant and sweet. She sat on the floor, with her legs on the side in order not to rip the skirt of her suit. She had left her shoes outside the roof door. The floor was covered with green elasticated leather, very cool—something soft, reminiscent of a marine animal. She liked to walk barefoot on that roof. She felt free. She thought about the sea, when she walked on the beach at low tide, and she watched her footprints filling up behind her.

She sipped the small bottles, one after the other. This made her smile—she now remembered that Samuel had told her one night they had been in a downtown Karaoke, drinking:

“You hold your liquor well; you know how to drink like a man.” As for him, his head would spin after two glasses and he would become sentimental. He would talk nonsense and his head would fall on Ujine’s shoulder! His eyes were weird, as if he had four pupils.

She propped her back against the chimney blocks. The air-conditioning compressor made the floor vibrate. Above the low wall, the city stretched out ahead—the city that never sleeps. Far beyond the yellow-lit highways, there were the external boulevards, the first buildings, and even further away, there were the flickering houses, the towers, the gas plants, the marshalling yards, and the churches’ arrows, highlighted in red. There were the blind spots of public gardens, the wastelands and the dark river valley.

Ujine fancied that in this whole city there is somebody was perhaps thinking about her and Samuel was as small as a pinhead, like an amoeba. If she called out, if she screamed his name, would he hear? If she thought about him hard, squeezed her temples in her hands, would he turn over in his sleep, would he look towards the horizon? Would he see her in his dreams?

Suddenly, she bent over in half—she received a blow to the upper abdomen. She was not expecting it. The memory came back violently; it overwhelmed and suffocated her. She whined a little, she felt the tears rise from her whole body, brim over her eyelids and flow into her mouth.

She and Samuel were on the road that winds through the fog along the North Sea, through Eulalie hills. She recalled how their name was unknown to her. She called them weeds and Samuel had explained and he had even given the Latin name—they were plants from China or Japan. Eulalie—that sweet name appealed to her. Samuel had stopped the car in a clearing at the end of a dirt road. Together, through the windshield spotted with droplets, they had watched the wisps of fog skimming the plants. The light of the rising day illuminated the sky with a burst multiplied by the dew drops. The tall stems were motionless, light, gushing out and exulting. There was not a single sound. Ujine heard the vibration of her heart. She placed her head on Samuel's chest to listen to the rhythm beating at the same pace—a short beat, a long beat ... she believed it was a moment of bliss unlike any other she had ever experienced before. She thought of all those lonely years, of her mother's passing in the hospital, of the anxiety of having to work, of having to find a place in the world. She was quiet; he too was silent. She knew that she loved him and that he loved her. She was certain of it. Nothing would ever take away this moment; what is beyond the world and beyond time.

It wasn't the memory that overwhelmed her. It was a feeling buried deep since her childhood—a scald, a pain, happiness, a rise from the depths. It was connected to the life that had settled within her belly—that thing that clung to her and made her dizzy.

Ujine was now standing at the edge of the chasm. She lifted her arms away from her body, like barely-raised wings. The light of dawn was already facing her, penetrating the depths of her eyes and bathing her with an irresistible appeal.

“I'm coming” she thinks, “I'll come”.

She felt this persistent gaze surrounding her, an eyeless gaze that penetrated and pierced her. In the naked sky, she saw a face emerging--a pale, smooth and featureless face, like a moon being born. It was a voice, a call to join infinity, to be free, to fly, without recollections, without suffering, hanging between heaven and earth, between two lives, up till the dream.

She was on the roof edge. Her toes clung strongly to the cement. Under each phalanx, she felt the pungent and cold granule, made flexible by rains and winds that had passed over the building since its construction. In Ujine's mind, in her head, there already was the big jump onto the parking lot, her body open and in pieces, with the blood gushing through her throat and

covering her eyes with a scarlet film—the blood flowing in streams between the wheels of the stationary vehicles. All this made a sound, not a sound, but a thin film surrounding the sky, the seas, the air terminal and even the Eulalie fields.

Her feet refused. The toes had parted—they were strong, entrenched. They would not let go of the cement ledge. They aimed their waves towards the centre of Ujine's body. They turned her legs into iron poles; they bent the spinal cord and threw her head back. They did not listen to the song of sirens! They were alive and they had no intention of dying!

### Three

Ujine had to free herself now. She did not decide it. Does one decide anything when one is alone? But she was not really alone anymore. She was not a mom yet but there were two of her already. Something had changed within her--she felt solemn and languid. No more being intoxicated—going out at night in search of happiness or despair; no more wandering aimlessly through the hills and climbing up stairs until it hurt. All that was good before. Before what? She asked herself that question; she brushed it aside like an annoying fly.

“So, how’s the love life?”

Micha, Charlotte and Rita—the girls from Commercial Law classes, as prying as ever. They were all the same, with their tales, their schemes and their gossip.

“You know what honey? Everything lies in manipulation. You get it? Either you manipulate or you are manipulated!”

It was simple indeed. One only had to choose.

Everything seemed ludicrous—the wait, the anger and the wounded pride. And there was that crazy thing that Ujine did--to go knock at Samuel’s parents’ door. The look on the old lady’s face was that of alarm and from the back of the apartment, the father’s voice quavered—such frailty and such ordinariness. The apartment smelt of heavy cooking—coq au vin and beef stew.

“No Miss, he doesn’t live here but he comes every day or he calls. Leave a message. We will give it to him. What’s your name, please?”

Ujine stammered. She had never been good at making up a name and at lying:

“Merbeau, Miss Merbeau. Thank you, Ma’am. Sorry to have bothered you.”

When the game was not a game anymore; it turned into a stupid bet, a rehashing, and a grimace. There was no answer nor would there be any.

“No, no thank you, no need to write down a message. It doesn’t matter. I’m sorry.”

The old lady was holding a notepad and a ballpoint pen. Ujine had time to read the letter head of an airline company—a gift from the Traveler probably. Was it from one of his air hostesses? She did not wait for the old lady to close the door—she pressed the elevator button but did not wait for it to arrive. She ran down the stairs, all eight floors but the time-switch had gone off and she had to grope her way down the remaining two floors, her heart pounding and her hands sweaty. It was something one could not forget.

The emptiness should not be let back in. Each minute and each second counted. She had to walk, attend classes at Law School and at the Chamber of Commerce, look for work, enrol at the gym, visit museums, go hiking, and attend singing lessons and workshops. To walk, to speak, to listen with all her strength all day long, even at night, without stopping, without thinking; to go up and down, to register, to count, to divide, to judge, without ever expecting. Expectation was an insatiable monster. It lurked, seeking its prey. The face of the tyrant, of the great manipulator remained hidden in the emptiness. To expunge it; to destroy it. To learn to loathe what one once loved.

First of all, to stop being submissive. Ujine recalled the time when she always stayed close to her phone, for fear of missing a call from Samuel. Everything was coming back to her now, piece by piece—a web of lies and mortification. During those evenings when she was lying in bed, she would listen to the sounds of the city—the horns, the roaring of a motorcycle (T.E. Lawrence’s motorcycle on which he had sought death), and the sirens of ambulances which came from everywhere simultaneously. The phone would be on the sheet next to her. She would look at the black casing; the screen remained blank. It did not light up; it refused to vibrate.

“Come on, ring! I beg you! Now, right now, ring! I will count to a hundred and you’ll ring. I’ll take a shower, leisurely. I’ll wash my hair and when I’ll come out of the bathroom, I’ll see the call. I go down to the courtyard, I throw out the garbage bag, I go round the building as if I had something to check and I come back up--well, look here! The incoming call signal!”

She recalled Samuel’s condescending air:

“Never wait, never expect anything.”

Or, some other time, she did not remember why anymore:

“The world does not fulfill your desires.”

One night, they were together on a hilltop, in Samuel’s beautiful car. The sky was huge; a plane had just taken off. Had Ujine spoken of the future, or simply whether they would meet the next day? Samuel was watching the plane’s contrail. It was as if wishing very strongly was enough to make it fall! Ujine had felt a pain near her heart—a small stab. She had not replied then but now she rebelled:

“Bullshit!” she said out loud, probably making heads turn in the street.

“Bullshit! Why would I believe that I can bring down a plane?” What a goddam fool I’ve been!”

All that she had not dared say. All that she had allowed to be said. What she should have said.

How it was hard not to answer the phone. Ujine had changed her phone number—nothing much to expect now. But that was not enough. She wanted to understand what had happened, how she had let herself fall into the trap. She tried to go back in time. She would thus be able to erase the wounds and blur the lines. She had to see them first, clearly and erase them afterwards. All those trials and tribulations and that meanness. All that she believed to be a game before realizing that she had been played. Was love enough to mask insults? Or was it not love but pride? She located her memories. She would like to write them down in an account book. She would call it *Assets and Liabilities*.

Well, let’s see! A date—she had waited in the cold rain, in front of the metro, because Samuel had sent a message: Exit 2, 3 pm.

She went back to that place--to check, to comprehend. It was the station near the Stock Exchange, full of people as usual--a busy crowd, jostling. In front of the metro, there were street peddlers and groups of students who looked like grasshoppers. There was a beggar, panhandling and as usual, that ageless man, with the black, dyed hair and the pale face. He stood there, leaning against the wall, watching the girls pass by. They had given him a nickname—they called him Beethoven. He had this frozen expression; legend had it that he had lost his fiancée long ago and that he kept waiting for her at that very station, every day. Ujine returned to Exit 2. She now felt a kind of rage, thinking she, too, had looked like Beethoven, standing with wet hair, waiting for the arrival of the fiancé who did not

show up. Because Samuel did not come to the rendez-vous. But what if he *had* been there--on the other side of the street, hidden behind a pillar, or near Exit 1, or even at the bottom of the stairs, near the ATMs? Her heart pounded heavily in her neck; she felt the anger sweeping over her. From each of these spots, Exit 2 could be seen clearly.

Well, let's see, something else! There was that telephone call one morning while she was leaving class with Micha and other girls—they had to review the preparation of their presentation on *King Lear*. She had taken the call, all the same. She had said:

“Don't hang up; I'll get to you right away.”

To the girls, she had said:

“Order the sashimis and green tea, I'll be right back.”

She left the cafeteria, it was too noisy. She was bursting with a wave of pleasure as she brought the phone to her lips. She heard him—his voice curt and nasty:

“I told you already, I hate it when you talk to someone else while I'm on the phone with you. I'll leave you to your business now.”

After that, there was silence. She kept trying to call back but there was no answer. That kind of silence could not be broken: it was (almost) the everlasting, mechanical silence of interrupted communication. Did he do this to *me*? And immediately she gave the answer out loud:

“Well yes, he did it to you! You deserved it! You accepted it!”

To accept nothing from now on—nothing from this guy and nothing from any other guy.

Well... let's see, what else? She recalled the lack of consideration and the so-called life lessons. That was indeed what he called the Game. She had believed that it was a game that he had made up just for her, that young man, who was so tall and so confident; that she then was his young woman, without experience, without a family, without a profession, that he would take under his wing and to whom he would teach the rules of life. It was a dance where he was the guide and she was the paragon. The only dance he loved was the tango and she had followed him to that strange nightclub in the basement of a building where men of a certain age were twirling

around with very young women. He had told her that she needed to let herself go, let herself be swept away. Now she understood this dance and why he loved it so much—it was a stiff and theatrical dance, with the bandoneon’s music squealing through the loudspeakers. She had gone there only once. Did he still go? But anger made her forget everything—the steps, the music and even the place where all that was hiding. Maybe he had gone there only once—to show her that game for which he had set up the rules and the first rule was that he would never have to account for them.

To change the meeting place as he pleased, to call, to send a brief text in his own distinctive way: “RDV Hilton Hotel 1 30 pm”. And Ujine would run, dropping everything. She would either hop on a bus or the metro and when she was pressed for time, she would even take a taxi. She would arrive panting, with her heart pounding and her hands sweaty. Several times, Samuel was already there, looking bored, with his hands in his pockets, talking with the receptionists—he did not even recognize her from afar. Oh, that’s right, that young man was very short-sighted, but why didn’t he wear his eyeglasses? Several other times, he was not there. The hotel lobby--huge, jammed with people but empty. At the reception, nobody knew him. The receptionists--but these were probably not the same ones—watched her, stared at her and probably even snickered. What to do? That’s right, the Game forbade her to inquire, to ask questions. Only this rule that Samuel had stated once and for all:

“I never wait. Three minutes past the appointment time, I leave.”

Why three minutes? In case we would not have the Atomic Clock time?

But what was it that Ujine missed so much? Was it the date, or that brief moment of happiness when they would meet, when Samuel seemed to forget everything, when their bodies would slide over each other and they would become one, like in those childhood games where you would bring your faces closer to each other, to see the eyes lose themselves and become one? When they would fall asleep side by side, carried away by their dreams, but on the same raft, until dawn, until the beach of awakening, and she could look at his body, feel the softness of his upper thighs and the warmth of his shoulder at the neck joint.

To obliterate everything, unless it was to remember everything, even the pain, even the inner core, Ujine returned to those places they had gone, retracing her steps backwards--the hotel

and movie theatre foyers, the bars, the church, the steps of the central library, the entrance of Daimaru store. All those places where her steps had relentlessly pounded, those monuments that expectation had either rendered magical, glorious, transcendent, sparkling with neon lights, and embellished with marble or steel, or frightening, ominous and secluded. There were also arches under the bridges, train station platforms, metro entrances and vacant lots.

What was there left? Nothing; not even bitterness, that bitterness that Samuel sought, that he held up as example. The two poles of life according to Samuel: boredom and bitterness. She remembered—at first she had replied:

“It’s strange, me, I never get bored.”

Samuel had shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m not talking about boredom like you would say you are bored shitless.”

He had gestured to the café, to the stained mirrors on the walls, to the seated people and to his cup full of black liquid. It was an underground café, situated under the metro stairs, with a strange made-up name—La Crêpe Michèle.

“No, I’m talking about this. You get it? All this.”

She had begun to understand that it was anguish and dissatisfaction--she had realized what it was that felt incomplete and was weighing on her heart, as if until then she had never wanted to acknowledge it. Later on, in her wandering, in her lunacy, Samuel’s words had come back to her: “All this.”

The bitterness; the emptiness. The taste of the espresso. The people waiting; the dizziness. That which will not be fulfilled, which never will. All this. The lessons of life.

For her to get through this, there had to be public condemnation. It was either Rita or Micha who provided her with the solution. One day she ventured, in veiled terms, to speak of herself as if she was talking about someone else:

“What would you say of somebody who asks you to call them at a certain phone number and when you want to call, the line remains busy for half an hour and when finally the call goes through, nobody answers?”

And the answer, obvious:

“I would say that a guy who amuses himself like that is a psycho and I would flee as far away as possible.”

That’s what it was then: he was quite simply a madman. Ujine had fallen prey to a madman and in the process, she had turned a little mad herself.

To cure herself, Ujine retraced backwards the steps of her last walk, that crazy night when she almost died. Her steps led her to the train, towards the airport. Time had gone by—the child had begun to really exist; it was no longer just an idea. It pressed against her stomach, against her bladder. Ujine threw up in the bathroom sink of the railway station. In the mirror, behind her wan reflection, a woman was watching her.

“I’m sorry.”

Ujine’s eyes were filled with tears. The woman came up to her.

“It’s your first?”

Ujine nodded. She felt ashamed.

“You’ll see, in two months you’ll feel better. You’ll even feel great!”

She held out a tissue. Usually, Ujine hated pity; yet there, in the solitude of the station bathroom, it made her feel better. She whispered a hesitant ‘Thank you’ and went out onto the platforms which were swept by the cold wind. She decided against going up to the terminal. Now she was certain of it--Samuel never went away on trips; she might even have made up everything. She crossed the parking lot and walked up to the hotel. It was late in the afternoon and the night shift was not on duty yet. At the reception, a young woman watched her suspiciously. With her pale complexion, her sunken eyes, her shapeless coat (with nothing to conceal yet; but the need to

dress in large sizes, to cloak her shapes), Ujine looked nothing like an air hostess, one of those hostesses that Samuel used to bring here.

“Could I see a room?”

Asking the question, she could not believe it. *Miss Priss* looked at her ironically.

“Sorry, I’m not allowed to give tours. Anyway, there’s no room available but you can always check our website!”

She was lying. Ujine had seen only three or four rooms with their curtains open. Ujine went over her night on the roof; it was as if all that had happened a long time ago, to somebody else. Something was still shaking within her; it was neither the knees nor the ankles. It was in the memory area which was found behind the neck, between the shoulder blades. She felt the sweat dampening the palms of her hands. She wiped them nervously on her coat. The young woman at the reception was now downright hostile; she was eyeing the phone on the counter.

“Can I be of any more assistance?”

Ujine retreated, step by step.

“No, no, thank you.”

She walked towards the exit. She left. When she reached the centre of the parking lot, she turned around and looked up at the roof of the building, at the edge of gray concrete against the sky. It was too high for the birds but she thought she saw a lean silhouette, with arms outstretched, somewhat resembling a stork.

There was no being alone; there was no time to be at peace. Ujine wanted revenge for her wasted actions. She did everything the Game prohibited. She called the bank and left crazy messages for Samuel. Now that she had managed to get his cellphone number, she set up dates via text messages and watched hidden in a building entrance, disguised in her coat and dark glasses. Sometimes he came. He did not look too triumphant. He would look left, then right, he

would turn, would wait, he would expect, he would glance at his phone. As it happens, Ujine had just sent him a message:

“Never mind! See you one of these days perhaps.”

Those were his favourite words. Since we were certain of nothing, that tomorrow did not exist.

She did not want to stay idle anymore. She forced herself to go out, to be outdoors, and to meet people. It was her feet which took her; she did not even have to think. After classes—the gym, not light gym intended for moms-to-be, but rhythmic combat in a cheap downtown room, in the company of strong women, under the guidance of a very plump but agile mixed-race woman. Ujine thought that in this case it was a good omen. And one, and two, uppercut, straight left, and one, and two, right swing, hook, the body forward, resting on the left leg, the foot really flat. All those unnecessary movements were a little ridiculous but beneficial to the soul. The woman next to her was not very young anymore and must have been pretty once. She now was worn-out by sedatives and sleeping pills. She struck out blindly, swung and hit. It was not that hard to imagine her to be lashing out at her man, at her traitor.

Ujine had found work in a rental agency—the manager’s name was Christian Jonquet. They were on first names terms with each other. He was in his forties, gay and stressed but she got along well with him. He sent her on assignments, because she looked good and her law studies had impressed him:

“Ujine, there’s this apartment to show. It’s far away. Take a taxi. We must not miss this deal.”

When he got all worked up, she would say:

“Come on, relax, it will be fine.”

She secured deals. She dressed well, she wore makeup. She was well aware that with some eye shadow, with some red on her cheeks, with her black hair slicked in oil like silk, she could win anybody over. It was a kind of challenge. To bring in money, to be competent, to outdo oneself—not for herself, nor for the company but for the fun of it, like when one ran a hundred metre-race or jumped over a rope, it was a matter of muscles. And then to feel grown-up at last (at almost thirty, it was high time). To experience the city like never before—the

interviews, the meetings, the chic restaurants, and the conferences with the bankers. To ride in a comfortable car, with a chauffeur, with tinted windows, air conditioning, leather seats, she who was accustomed to shabby cabs, with diaper-wearing drivers! Once or twice, she felt a little emotional as she thought she recognized Samuel's car—the dark gray sedan of which he was so proud, with a somewhat ridiculous name—Prima, Prélude, Protégé, something like that. A furtive image; a reminder of her former life. She stretched; she had taken off her pumps in the car in order to spread her toes. She propped her back against the cushions and she watched the gray and white scenery unfold on the side. She felt nothing; she thought about nothing.

But everything had to end sooner or later—the weight, the nausea and the lightheadedness. Christian was the first to figure it out. The girls, Rita, the others--no one had guessed, but Christian was intuitive; he was more attentive. One day, he stopped her in her tracks:

“Ujine, may I talk to you?”

He did not beat about the bush:

“Tell me the truth, when is it due?”

His eyes twitched when he was angry.

“Why did you lie to me?”

Ujine burst into tears, not to move him but because reality had caught up with her. She sat down, she felt heavy, heavy and foolish and this made her cry even more.

“Of course, I would not have hired you.”

Christian was puzzled. His anger had vanished. He sat down facing Ujine:

“And he, what does he say?”

Ujine shrugged her shoulders. *He*, well, there was no *he*.

“So you're alone with your problem.”

He added:

“How did you do that? I thought you were smart.”

He took out a box of tissues. Really, that was the universal answer to single mothers’ tears.

“Okay, well, you will work some more until I find someone to replace you. After that, you fend for yourself, OK?”

No contract, no compensation; there was nothing to say. In the end, with a three-month advance, he didn’t have to. It was he, the homosexual, temperamental and demanding, who had been her only support. When Ujine had told Rita, she had yelled:

“What? That’s all? It was useless to have studied law. It’s you who did him a favour!”

The day she left, Christian kissed Ujine on both cheeks.

“You’ll keep me posted, at least?”

And when she wanted to return his box of business cards with the agency name, he refused:

“Keep them. They might come in handy next year.”

Life had slowed down within her, around her. Ujine observed the changes, day after day. It was a hot spot at the centre of her body, and also in the room and in the building. Something that was opening up but at the same time, it was enclosing and protecting her. Silence.

After the work frenzy at the agency, the hustle and bustle had subsided; there was no more expectancy, no more plan. But there was not *nothing*--there was strength, there was power. Not wisdom, that no, and not reason. There was a pulse of life beating in her folds, moving. At the OB/GYN’s, Ujine listened for the first time to the heartbeats of the foetus, muffled and impetuous, amplified by the speaker. A different rhythm from hers, faster.

When she went out into the street, despite the snow blocking the sidewalks, she heard the beat. It covered everything, even the roaring of the engines, even the racket of metro bogies.

Time dragged on. Every second and every gesture, once insignificant and irrelevant, today went on and on. Ujine was amazed with herself for living each moment as if it would never end. She realized that she lived with someone; not with Samuel, not with Christian, but with someone else, who was her double within herself.

A weight. It could not be the foetus, with only a few grams of flesh and almost boneless. But her belly was becoming bigger; it was filling up with liquid. Her breasts were swelling. She noticed veins where once the skin had been smooth. The nipples had hardened and were covered with little raised bumps. At night, she gasped for air and sweated—she would send the quilt flying. With her toes spread out like at the beach, she rested her hands on her belly in order to feel the waves and shivers. She was the core of the universe; everything revolved around her. Through the bare window, she looked at the night. The moon moved slowly—it is a god of infinite beauty. It looked back at her and she welcomed the wave of blessing that washed over her. She knew that she would be strong enough to go all the way, to live her story. She knew she would never be alone. Nothing else mattered. The cellphone could vibrate on the nightstand and the small window could light up. It could be Samuel who had found her number and was calling. Perhaps he knew everything; perhaps he had learned everything. He had inquired into the matter and now he would like to know. He believed he had rights. Ujine did not leave a greeting message on her answering machine, except for the voice of Kiri Te Kanawa singing *Bailero*...that voice she loved, who spoke for her. It was as if time had stopped—that which was, that which would never be; the same thing, the same second, infinitely long.

Ujine experienced two disappointments.

First, she took a taxi to drive her around at random--an outrageous and unreasonable luxury. She felt too fat to walk. She told the driver:

“You drive; I’ll show you the way.”

The guy did not answer. From time to time, he glanced suspiciously in the rear view mirror. He looked as shabby as his car--an old man, with gray curly hair and a drooping moustache

yellowed by nicotine. He smelled of Cologne and urine. He probably drove with adult diapers to avoid having to stop. As a matter of fact, in the hills, she found an isolated and misty area.

“Stop here, please.”

They were in the open countryside--not a single house, not a single car.

“I’ll only be a minute.”

He left the engine running and got out of the car to light a cigarette. Ujine shivered in the fog, the fine drops covered her face, making her hair stick to her forehead. The tall grasses were motionless, frozen in the air--flowerless, mere bent spears. The eulalies. It was her first time back here since the one with Samuel, when life had implanted itself in her belly. It really was a memory of the future, delicate but tenacious, like the great humble grasses. Ujine returned to the car, she told the driver:

“It’s really beautiful, isn’t it?”

But he was sucking on his cigarette butt and came out with:

“These damn weeds! They probably come from China.”

She could either laugh or cry at this.

Rita was the source of the other problem. When she learned that Ujine was pregnant, alone, without help, she began to come more often. She brought fruits, she took steps regarding the clinic arrangements, she invited people from her community, from a church where she sang every Saturday afternoon. Ujine had even accompanied her there. It was in a posh neighbourhood, far from pollution and traffic.

“You’ll see, my dear, you’ll be fine. We’ll take good care of you.”

Ujine was worried about money. Her savings had dwindled.

“Let’s not talk about that. We are friends, right? I told them that we have known each other forever.”

It felt good to have a friend, not to be alone for the delivery. At Rita's clinic, they were nice. Mr. OBGYN was a small, chubby and cheerful man, with a reassuring grip. Rita accompanied Ujine to all the appointments. She would stay in the waiting-room, flipping through magazines and when Ujine came out, she would kiss her.

"How was it? Nothing to worry about? We will go through this until the end, together."

However, one day, with the due date imminent, she brought a folder to the clinic.

"You must sign here, and here. "

"What are these papers?"

Rita put her arms around Ujine.

"It's for the baby, you understand? For it to have a future."

Ujine did not understand. She read the forms. It was an act of abandonment, and while reading it, her eyes filled with tears.

"But I want to keep the baby. Why are you showing me these papers?"

Rita claimed to be understanding.

"I assure you, my dear, this is the best solution. How will you manage otherwise? I already found a home for it, with good people. You saw them at church, they have a nice house. They will take care of all the costs. It's arranged. The baby will have a real dad and a real mom."

Ujine was so desperate that she signed the act. She wrote her name in the box.

Then she pulled herself together—Rita, with her attitude, her hymns, and her principles. Life; to defend life. To steal children. She had brought a bouquet—a spray of blooming forsythias taken from the clinic's garden.

"Your papers, you can tear them up and your flowers, you can take them back. I will never give my baby away, do you hear? And you can tell it to the whole clinic, to all these people with their beautiful houses."

She did not scream but her voice carried so much rage that Rita left with her yellow flowers. She took off like a rat, so fast and so far that Ujine would never hear of her again.

Something was under way; it would not stop. It was a motion that came from afar. In fact it had begun with the universe, and it was slow, it was long and it was deep. It was animal but it was also the will of the other, an unknown other (certainly not Samuel, he had been nothing but the agent of fate), a desire.

Every day brought Ujine closer to the birth. She hoped for it and feared it. At night, she sometimes dreamed that she was light. She was a child again. She ran as fast as she could on a hard sandy beach, along the waves. Her mother was sitting in the dunes, sheltered from the wind. The evil that was going to kill her had not been declared yet, but the pain was already there, somewhere in the belly, to announce it. Occasionally, she made a face. Ujine looked at her:

“Are you in pain, mom?”

“It’s nothing. Just a pain on the side. It will go away.”

When Ujine woke up, she was puzzled for a few seconds: all that was a dream? Her hands sought her stomach; she felt the foetus move and the shape of its foot on the lining of the uterus.

“Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.”

The hospital room was less chic than the clinic but it was free—the women practiced their breathing. Ujine thought how three months back she would have laughed: all these women lying on their back with their big bellies, breathing in and breathing out. Sea lions on the ice field bank. Were we going to deliver through the mouth?

She had had Samuel on the phone, quickly. She saw that it was him and she did not pick up. And then yes, she finally picked up. Why hide? He was a stranger now. She had forgotten how deep his voice was, always faltering. She recalled how she had loved his voice before everything else. For the pleasure of hearing his voice, of remaining aloof and evasive:

“What are you doing at the moment?”

Ujine replied literally:

“Well, I’m between two, uh, occupations.”

Samuel spoke about his job at the bank, of an upcoming trip, of a transfer to Africa or perhaps to Korea.

“How about we meet?”

Ujine panicked briefly. There was no way she would let him see this big belly, she did not want to explain herself.

“Look Sammy, I’m a little busy myself. I have to go.”

There was silence.

“And where are you going?”

She wanted to answer: on the moon or to Eulalie land, but she did not. She just said:

“I’ll tell you about it someday.”

She sensed that he was intrigued. He was probably even jealous and she felt a quite foolish sense of triumph which made her want to laugh. That certainty not to give in was stupid. She was ashamed of it but she acknowledged that it made her feel good. She hung up. She would not answer the phone anymore. Perhaps she already was a mom and she should think about nothing else than to protect her child. After all, it was well-known that male rabbits devour their offspring.

Ujine lived one day at a time. She ate a lot to feed the baby. She stopped looking at her weight on the scale. At the gym, each woman had her own story. There were the huge ones, the passive ones, the plaintive ones, accompanied by the genitors. There were the ones like Ujine who had a little round belly, almost pointed, the ones lost in their overblouses, the ones in their tracksuits, as if they were heading to a competition, a volleyball game maybe. Ujine spoke to Nelly, the one closest to her in the room. She was a cashier in a supermarket, and when she left

there, she went to work. Was she given a comfortable chair at least? And the niño, did he like working? Nelly laughed. She had bad teeth, but her smile lit up her bronze-coloured face.

“It’s funny, at each cha-ching of the cash register, he moves in my belly as if he wants to grab coins!”

“So he’ll be a banker!”

Nelly laughed.

Ujine recalled how eight months back when the foetus was still as small as a shrimp and she was going to meet with Samuel in front of the bank, she was thinking this: Samuel in his mother’s womb, sleeping while sucking his thumb, his feet already so big that he did not know where to shove them! Did a man think of such things? He would then have to no longer be a man, to cease to give in order to receive. One day, Samuel was theorizing, as usual--men this, and women that and Ujine had said:

“The only difference is that men give (their semen) and women receive it.” Everything they had not said to each other; everything that had been held in abeyance. Everything she had buried within her and, there you go, it had become a child! A life within life; a stranger within you.

The pain lingered for days on. The contractions of the uterus. The midwife’s lesson unfolded as expected. The ten-cent coin, the twenty-cent one, the fifty-cent one. A ripple. In the delivery room, she imagined a huge and distended belly—a belly the size of the globe! “It’s me”, thought Ujine, “it’s happening to me. I can’t be someone else, I can’t be elsewhere” Men could always be elsewhere. Even when they were cowardly at war, there was not one single moment when they didn’t get to choose.

“To be free rather than to be King!”

That was Samuel’s motto. Did she believe in it? She was not sure anymore.

It was here; it was happening. The hospital OBGYN had decided it thus. He consulted his appointment book (not his almanac), and with a single shot, he had triggered the event. He was not one to be convinced that it was something unique, wonderful and miraculous. Every day, every hour, it happened: at 9 am, Ms. Nadeau; at 10 pm, Mrs. Sauvaigo; at 11 30, Mrs. Janicot; at 12 30 Ma'am, uh, Miss... Definitely not at night, not on Saturday, which happened to be his day out with his son (he is divorced), nor on Sunday, because he practiced rowing in the park lake. But this did not always work. Sometimes, he had to hurry. It did not go well, the three-thirty required surgery—forceps, the vacuum extractor, a C-section.

Ujine babbled incoherently, probably due to the epidural... she had not wanted one. She hated shots. She had let herself be persuaded. Her feet were in the stirrups: breathe in, breathe out; breathe in, breathe out...ten cents, five cents, twenty, fifty cents, was there a bigger coin? Ujine was not there, she was no longer there. The labour was taking place elsewhere. She had been replaced by someone else—a fat woman, squashed on her back, with her legs pressing backwards. Her feet were clinging to the stirrups; she was pushing and pushing with her feet as if to throw herself backwards, to pull herself out, to resurface. Breathe in, breathe out. Might she have to carry the weight of the world like Atlas the giant? There were faces before her, leaning over her—the midwife, the nurses. The OBGYN had not deigned to show up yet. He was a traveler like Samuel, a business representative, with his chubby face and his hairy ears, his big nose and his shaggy eyebrows. Let's hope he will not come. If he came, she knew what she would say: No Sir, I don't need anything. I have all I need at home—vacuum cleaner, iron, refrigerator, freezer. For the laundry, I go to the Laundromat; the machines are always out of order.

“How does it look?”

“Well, well thank you, and for you?”

She winced. Where was Lord Moon? That's who I wanted to see, his beautiful face, his smile in the night. No, not that iodine projector that flooded the scene with that horrible light. Otherwise, Lord Sun please, in a clearing, in the pleasant summer atmosphere in the stubble field. The thing was, one witness was absent—in other words, the child's father.

“Will somebody be present for the birth?”

No, that's all. But this made the rounds of the hospital staff—it was recounted, noted down and underlined.

“Poor girl, all alone. There will be no one with her, no one to visit her.”

The faces leaned forward, attentive like good fairies. Ujine squeezed the hand of the midwife on her left—she was very young, with a child-like face, pink with blond curls slipping out of her cap. She felt a surge of gratitude—she wanted to know her name, how old she was and how long she had been a trainee midwife. Did she have a boyfriend? Would she be getting married soon? Breathe in, breathe out. Between two breaths, she had no time to ask these questions. She was so tired now—the day was almost over, the sun was hiding behind the clouds, and there was no moon. Only that dazzling light lingered. I would like so much for the baby to be born in blue water, in a clearing, in a field. When Lord Moon appeared in the sky, on the other side of the wall, she heard his song clearly—a soft murmur of water and weed. Ujine's daughter was born and Ujine fell asleep.

## Epilogue

Summer was here again. The clouds glided over the dunes while the wind stirred the thistles in the sand—the hair on the skin quivered only slightly. Ujine was lying in the foetal position, sheltered by the dune. She felt the wind on her skin and the sand between her toes. Eulalie had fallen asleep in the hollow of her stomach. She slept upside down, with her head down, as if she remembered her birth. Lying between Ujine's breasts, her little feet were surrendered and abandoned. Ujine then counted her toes, relentlessly. To make Eulalie laugh, she sometimes hummed to her the nursery rhyme that her mother used to sing softly—*this little piggy*. This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home; and at the last little finger--wi-wi-wi-wi-wi, all the way! One, two, three four, five, ten in all—tiny and pink, with pearly-white nails. Eulalie—that was the name Ujine had chosen, in memory of the large stems and fluffy pompons which mingled with the mist, on the road to the airport. Samuel did not say no; he did not ask why. He had returned from his travels—he would never go to the end of the world again. Life was as unpredictable as the clouds that passed over them, like the sea making its hourglass sound. When Eulalie was born, Ujine had decided she would take the baby to the sea every day to fill her with its sound and with its smell; for her to hold on to them forever. And that's what she did.

## Conclusion

The literary translator is the link between the source text author and the target text reader. As a result, the translator has to make choices—stylistic choices among others. The stylistic constraints discussed in this thesis have determined the importance for the translator to possess stylistic knowledge. Indeed, knowledge of stylistics helped me better understand Le Clézio's style and I selected my approach accordingly. I first set out to follow the source text closely as I wanted to recreate Le Clézio's syntax, diction and figurative language, in order to reproduce his style. That proved to be unrealistic. I was restricted by certain stylistic constraints imposed by Le Clézio's distinct style, but I endeavoured to be creative through the different choices I made. This sometimes meant altering the original structure, merging two sentences into one and changing the style of the text, as long as the original message remained unchanged.

The style of the target text thus became a product of both the original author and the translator. My analysis showed that I inevitably left my stylistic presence in the translation through my repetitive tendencies in specific cases (like consciously expanding for the target reader). 'Sourcerers' argue that a translator should be able to imitate the author's style and reproduce it in the target language as if it were the author's own writing if the author knew the target language. My analysis demonstrated that this is not always possible. No language can match another stylistically. Also, no matter how willing the translator is to reproduce the authorial style, they will inevitably leave traces of their own style in the translation—the "fingerprints" (2000: 244) mentioned by Baker, or the "deforming tendencies" (2000: 288) Berman refers to—whether through their choice of words or sentence structures.

Boase-Beier, in yet another article about style namely, *Mind Style Translated*, uses an interesting concept—the concept of "co-authorship" of the translated text. My translated text indeed "felt co-authored". Malmjkaer (2004: 2004) makes a similar point when she discusses the idea of "translational stylistics", arguing for an analysis which takes some degree of "amalgamation of source-text and target-text stylistic characteristics into account" and she "considers the style of the translator and how the presence of the latter is felt in the translation" (Boase-Beier 2006: 66).

In the light of my translation and of my analysis, I have concluded that stylistics can help look for the visible presence of the translator in a target text, and this can be done "either more or less explicitly in interaction with the presence of the original author" (Venuti 2004: 5). Also, the

study of translated texts may provide evidence for the notion that translation can be seen as a separate literary type with a special language which has its own stylistic characteristics, a text-type distinguishable both from non-translated texts and other types of translation.” (Boase-Beier 2006: 67)

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## *Un*

Une surface plane, molle, incurvée au centre, mais pas entièrement évidée.

Ridée, un peu.

Au repos, allongée, ou bien debout, reposant à la verticale au soleil, non loin de la mer. Qu'est-ce qui fait se recroqueviller les cinq doigts de chaque pied, non pas vraiment se recroqueviller, tendus plutôt, arqués vers le haut, écartés, comme on dit en éventail. L'idée du froid, sans doute, la masse mouvante de la mer qui déferle au bord de la plage, non pas le bruit de la mer (les pieds peuvent-ils entendre?) mais le souffle du vent du large, le souffle venu des profondeurs de l'horizon et remontant la côte au moment de la marée, et glissant sur la jeune femme en bikini, hérissant chaque poil le long des jambes, caressant la peau d'une main froide, le ventre au nombril orné d'un piercing vert, les seins dans le soutien-gorge aux bonnets triangulaires, jusqu'au visage renversé, abandonné, lui, complètement, les yeux révulsés derrière les paupières closes, les cheveux voltigeant s'emmêlant jusqu'à cacher le visage, une mèche

folle détachée des autres qui va et vient d'une joue à l'autre par-dessus le pont du nez entre les yeux.

Mais le pied, lui, ne s'abandonne pas. Debout, face au vent et à la mer, comme s'il surveillait, comme s'il résistait. Contre quoi, contre qui? Tous les muscles et tous les tendons sont prêts, bandés, non pas relâchés. Mollesse de la plante, apparente. À l'intérieur, les nerfs sont tirés, les osselets, les cartilages à leur place. Pas de repos. Pas de sommeil.

C'est une longue histoire. Cela a commencé vingt-six ans auparavant, quand Ujine est venue au monde. Encore tendre, comme flottant dans l'eau. La plante des pieds et la paume des mains toutes fripées, rougies. Les doigts très souples, que sa mère a comptés tout de suite pour être sûre qu'il n'en manquait pas, qu'il n'y en avait pas un de trop. Le gros orteil qu'Ujine suçait pour s'endormir, la jambe pliée jusqu'à son visage, les bras autour des cuisses, comme une sorte de nœud de chair rose, tiède et douce, très chaude, vivante. C'était au temps longtemps. Maintenant, Ujine ne connaît plus le goût de son gros orteil, c'est devenu lointain, étranger. Différent. Tout juste un souvenir, celui de sa mère qui lui a dit un jour : « Tu ressemblais à Bala Râma, le frère de Krishna, en train de sucer son orteil assis sur sa feuille de lotus sur l'eau des rivières. » Maintenant sa mère n'est plus là. Son souvenir la renvoie à un temps qui n'existe pas. Cela s'appelle la solitude, sans doute.

Pour savoir, elle a demandé à Marc, son petit ami, de prendre son gros orteil dans sa bouche. « Quel goût ça a ? » Marc est amoureux. Il aime les histoires étranges, les incartades à la banalité des jours. « Ça a le goût du lait », a-t-il dit, après réflexion, et ses yeux riaient. Il voulait goûter à toutes les parties de son corps, mais Ujine s'est rétractée. Elle a repris son orteil. « Espèce de pervers », a-t-elle dit. Mais elle n'a pas voulu expliquer pourquoi. « C'est toi qui me l'as demandé. » Ujine a mis la main sur sa bouche. « Embrassons-nous, c'est mieux ! »

Cela s'appelle donc la solitude. Être seul comme un gros orteil. Bien sûr la compagnie des autres doigts, les deux pieds. Mais cela ne rend pas leur solitude moins pesante. Sans voir, sans parler. Si loin de la bouche. Si loin de l'âme.

La terre. Le corridor interminable, carrelé en mosaïque noir et blanc, qui conduit à l'escalier de ciment. Du granito. Quelque chose qu'on ne fait plus depuis longtemps, importé d'Espagne, de minuscules dés de pierre de toutes les couleurs qu'on polit longuement à la meule électrique, jusqu'à faire cette surface lisse, froide, et les pieds nus alors se recroquevillent, forment des arcs, marchent sur les côtés, sur les talons, pour fuir le contact avec cette pierre autrefois hérissée de pointes, que le poli n'a pas complètement abrasée.

« Mais tu marches comme un pingouin ! »

« Ujine, tiens-toi droite, marche normalement, enfin ! »

« Cette fille a les pieds plats, il faudra l'emmener voir l'orthopédiste. »

Les pieds plats. Trop longs, affaissés, les pieds qui manquent de cambrure. Des pieds de garçon. Des pieds de vache, ont dit les filles à l'école. Il fallait les corriger, alors, les punir. Les enfermer dans des bottines à tiges métalliques, les exercer, les dominer. Une, et deux. Une, et deux.

« Sur la pointe, Ujine, sur la pointe ! »

Le plancher de la grande salle de danse, avec ses lames vernies, glissantes, au grain très doux, et la douleur qui entre comme une lame, force les orteils, serre, brûle les tendons et remonte le long des jambes, jusqu'aux hanches, jusqu'à l'aine.

« Je ne peux plus, madame, j'ai trop mal.

— Allons allons, pas d'apitoiement sur soi-même, mademoiselle. Une, et deux. Une, et deux. »

Et la longue canne du maître à danser, qui touche ses fesses, touche son dos, à peine, légèrement, et les pieds reçoivent la décharge électrique qui les jette, les fait bondir, les fait voler !

Courir. Après des années, courir. Sur la plage de sable fin, en Bretagne, la lieue de grève comme on l'appelle, le sable durci par le vent et la mer à marée basse, courir de plus en plus vite, en sautant par-dessus les goémons et les taches grises des méduses échouées, courir de plus en plus loin, les pieds volent sur la plage, plongent dans les flaques en jetant des gerbes de gouttes salées et tièdes.

« Ujine ! U-jine, arrête-toi ! »

Être libre, à seize ans. Frapper le sol, s'élancer, voler l'espace de quelques secondes. Danser, bondir. Comme

si le sol renvoyait les coups, ici, n'importe où. Sur le ciment des trottoirs, sur le goudron des routes. Les ron-  
deurs sous les orteils, les coussins de peau souple et  
dure, les talons ronds comme des galets, usés, très doux,  
et les tendons sensibles sous la peau, cet avers de la vie,  
avers de l'être, sans cesse sur le sol, sans cesse en contact  
avec la terre, sur lequel repose tout le poids de l'exis-  
tence, quarante-deux kilos de femme, dans sa robe de  
travail, dans son complet trois-pièces gris anthracite,  
dans le hall où elle accomplit son boulot d'hôtesse d'ac-  
cueil, pour le salon du Prêt-à-porter ou du Cheval, le  
salon du Pacemaker, des Éditions médicales, des Agents  
de voyage...

« Vous porterez obligatoirement des escarpins à  
talons. »

« Ni baskets ni ballerines. »

« Chaussures fermées. »

Les rires des autres filles, leurs plaintes aussi :

« Mes pieds, mes pauvres pieds! »

« Ils me tuent! »

« Je ne les sens plus. »

« J'ai l'impression d'avoir des sabots de bois. »

Et après cela, le bain d'eau chaude, calmant, émol-  
lient, pour dormir, pour oublier, les orteils debout au  
fond de la baignoire, dix îlots surnageant dans la mer de  
mousse, une famille de petits canards. Comme jadis,  
toute petite, la voix de sa mère en train de compter et  
recompter :

« Un deux trois quatre cinq... et dix! Et dix! » Tenant

le dernier comme avec une pince, petit bout rose avec son minuscule ongle de nacre.

Avancer, toujours.

Frapper du bout du soulier, et porter le poids sur le talon minuscule. Un apprentissage. La première fois, c'était naguère, Ujine était encore petite. Elle avait mis les souliers de sa maman, trop grands, c'était comme marcher avec des boîtes. C'était pour entendre le bruit, clac-clac sur le plancher du salon, et les applaudissements et les rires de maman, de tante Annie, de papy Robert, de papy Dany, de tonton Jacques. Leurs rires, leurs commentaires. « Une vraie petite femme! — Et puis tu as vu comme ça la cambre! — C'est incroyable, c'est tout de suite un bout de femme, le dos creusé, les fesses sorties! »

Mais la vraie première fois, c'était longtemps après, pour une fête, un mariage peut-être. Une grande salle sonore, un plancher de bois verni, une véranda, un jardin d'hiver décoré de guirlandes, de plantes en pots, l'air était parfumé, un orchestre jouait quelque part, des *trotts*, des mambos, du cha-cha-cha. Ujine a enfilé les escarpins en cuir dur, elle était pieds nus malgré la fraîcheur du printemps.

C'était la première fois, elle avait l'impression de flotter, plus grande que la plupart des hommes, plus mince, plus haute, les talons devaient mesurer douze centimètres, tout à coup le sol était lointain, léger, au début elle le touchait du bout du pied, attendant le contact des talons, très précautionneusement, l'un, puis

l'autre. Elle dansait. Ses pieds s'envolaient maintenant, portés par le rythme de la musique, les talons claquaient sur le sol, servaient de pivots, tout était devenu facile, rapide.

« Vous dansez bien, mademoiselle. — Vous allez souvent en boîte? » Elle y était allée, après cette permission, tous les week-ends, même tous les soirs pendant les vacances. Le bac était loin. C'était ça la chose urgente, la chose à faire en priorité, cette aventure qui commençait sa vraie vie, qui faisait d'elle une femme, une vraie femme, plus une enfant timide et dépendante. Ce n'étaient plus le tango ou le *trott*, c'étaient les danses violentes, sauvages, sous les coups de la guitare basse et de la batterie, un rythme mécanique, oppressant, serré, à peu près le rythme du cœur qui bat dans les artères. Le sang pulsait du bas vers le haut, pressé par les tendons, par les muscles des mollets, les muscles des cuisses. Le sang montait à la tête, si loin la tête, enflammait les joues, enivrait le cerveau. Mais c'était le sang venu du sol, de la piste de danse phosphorescente, le sang venu de la plante des pieds, le sol qui ondulait et frappait ses pieds, la musique cachée, libérée par coups sourds dans tout son corps. « Tu es belle, tu dances comme une pro, tu es bandante, regarde, tous les garçons te désirent quand tu dances! » Elle n'écoutait pas. Elle ne voulait pas qu'on s'approche. Dans les boîtes, les garçons venaient toujours par-derrière, à toucher, jusqu'à la frôler, c'était un petit jeu, ils se branlaient contre ses fesses. Elle avait ça en horreur, elle les repoussait d'une bourrade, la main à plat sur leur poitrine, elle sentait la

sueur qui trempait leurs T-shirts. Ils étaient vicieux, minables, ils s'écartaient un instant, comme de petits chiens peureux, puis ils revenaient.

Ses jambes nues, tous ses muscles tendus, son ventre plat, son nombril percé d'un bouton vert pomme, couleur de ses yeux. Elle rentrait à quatre heures du mat', crevée, énérvée, électrique, elle se jetait sur son lit sans même se déshabiller, juste quatre heures de sommeil avant le cours, psycho demain, puis *commercial english*, un peu de maths, n'importe quoi, elle n'y pensait même pas. Ses plantes libres, endolories, les orteils en éventail, la musique qui frémissait encore, un tremblement dans ses fibres, une racine électrique qui ne mourait pas, et cela glissait, s'en allait, hors d'elle par la peau dure des talons, par les phalanges des doigts, par les ongles.

C'était l'année où sa mère était morte à l'hôpital d'un cancer du pancréas, il n'avait pas fallu trois mois. On l'avait enterrée dans le petit cimetière de Villejuif, mais comme elle était bouddhiste on l'avait d'abord brûlée dans un four. Son père parti pour le tour du monde, jamais revenu.

Ujine ne pouvait plus s'en passer. Elle savait courir, sauter, marcher, attendre, perchée sur ses talons de douze centimètres, appuyée sur le bout des orteils. Elle pouvait tout, oui, elle pouvait tout faire. Ben, son petit ami du moment, se moquait un peu. « Comment vous faites, les nanas, pour tenir en équilibre là-dessus? » Lui, avec ses éternelles baskets, des trucs rouge et blanc comme des bottines de scaphandrier. Il lui arrivait à

l'épaule. « C'est ce qu'on sait faire de mieux, nous les nanas, comme tu dis, tu n'étais pas au courant? »

Dans le métro, en retard pour les cours comme toujours, en retard pour le boulot au salon Ambassador à l'aéroport, pour accueillir les P-DG, les Parfumeurs, les Cosmétiques. Elle descendait les marches, elle les remontait deux par deux, les talons bloqués contre le nez de marche, elle courait sur les pavés mouillés, à travers les chaussées craquelées, sur la terre caillouteuse des chantiers. Mais elle n'aimait pas les tapis mous et parfois elle était prise au piège des grilles de débordement, et les terrasses en caillebotis étaient ses ennemies. Les employeurs lui pardonnaient, ils l'aimaient bien parce qu'elle avait ce type eurasien, les cheveux clairs et les yeux obliques, et qu'elle était mince comme une liane, ça faisait bien dans les salons, ils disaient qu'elle portait bien les robes fourreau noires. « Pourquoi tu crois qu'on t'engage, hein? Parce que tu es jolie, voilà, mais ça ne te dispense pas d'être à l'heure. »

Chaque matin. Se lever, poser la plante du pied sur le carrelage froid. Après le sommeil (l'amour, le rêve). « Bonjour! » L'étonnement du premier contact. Les doigts recroquevillés sur le pavé. Marcher. « Tu marches avec les talons! » Les mots de cette vieille, une vieille fille sans aucun doute. C'était le premier appartement d'Ujine, un studio au cinquième sans ascenseur, c'était si bon et si enivrant la liberté, ne plus avoir à répondre à personne, ne plus supporter les vanes de son frère, les reproches de son père. Mais la vieille au quatrième,

juste en dessous — une prof de lettres, mal lunée, mal fagotée, mal baisée. Elle l'attendait derrière sa porte et, quand Ujine passait, elle l'interpellait, elle lui barrait le passage avec son bras maigre, elle la touchait du bout de ses doigts froids. « Un instant, mademoiselle ! » Un peu effrayante malgré sa maigreur et sa petite taille, ses cheveux teints en roussâtre, ses yeux gris pareils à des boutons de fièvre. « Je voudrais vous faire une observation. » Des années qu'Ujine n'avait pas eu peur d'une prof, elle repensait sans doute à Mlle Doux qui ne portait pas bien son nom, méchante, rusée, hargneuse, ses mauvais points, ses coups de règle sur les doigts, ses doigts crochus qui s'accrochaient aux cheveux des petites filles, les arrachaient très lentement, et Mlle Doux riait de les entendre pleurer à petits cris de souris, haï ! haï ! haï !

« Mademoiselle, est-ce que vous savez que vous marchez sur les talons ? » Avant même une réponse, elle continuait : « À vous voir, mademoiselle, on pourrait penser que vous êtes légère, une vraie sylphide, là, là, avec vos ailes, pfuii ! pfuii ! Mais quand on habite en dessous, boum ! Boum ! Vous devenez un éléphant ! Les talons en avant, et je cogne ! Je piétine ! J'ai des charrues aux pieds ! » Ujine s'était enfuie, elle descendait les escaliers quatre par quatre, la rampe tremblait, et la voix aiguë de Mlle Doux la poursuivait, la rattrapait : « Les talons ! Vous marchez sur les talons ! Sur les talons ! »

Alors Ujine devait vivre pieds nus, même les claquettes faisaient du bruit. Dérouler la plante du pied, lentement, les orteils d'abord, appuyer le talon doucement, dou-ou-ce-ment !

L'amour, c'était inattendu, inespéré.

Elle avait rencontré Samuel alors qu'elle n'y croyait plus. Ça n'avait pas été facile. Il n'allait pas dans les endroits qu'elle avait l'habitude de fréquenter, les bars à sushis, les clubs, les restos. Il ne dansait pas. Il n'aimait pas les karaokés. Il aimait les choses simples, c'est ce qu'il disait. Les promenades au bord de la rivière, sur les chemins de halage. La piscine, mais le soir, quand il n'y avait pas d'enfants. Il aimait en particulier une piscine au décor Belle Époque, carrelée de vert plutôt que de bleu, avec ses petites loggias décorées de fleurs de lotus en mosaïque. Délicatement démodée.

C'était là leurs premiers rendez-vous. Elle n'oublierait jamais le contact des carreaux verts, froids, mouillés, le pédiluve gluant, les marches de l'escalier en demi-lune qui s'enfonçait dans l'eau fraîche. C'était juin, le début de l'été. Dehors il faisait lourd, il pleuvait. L'eau ruisseauait sur les vitres du toit, les lampes faisaient des étoiles aux poutres de béton. Neuf étoiles, elle les avait comptées en glissant sur le dos, assourdie par le bonnet de bain en caoutchouc (« C'est obligatoire ici, avait précisé Samuel, ils sont très stricts sur les questions d'hygiène. »). Samuel respectait tous les interdits, il observait à la lettre les règlements. C'était son genre. Au début, il était si délicat. « Excusez-moi, mademoiselle... » Il s'excusait pour tout. Pour lui prendre la main, pour frôler sa poitrine. Pour lui poser des questions personnelles, ou pour ne pas répondre aux questions. « Excusez-moi, je ne peux pas parler de cela tout de suite. » Il avait eu une

maîtresse à vingt ans. Il l'avait avoué en détournant les yeux. « Peut-être qu'il est pédé? » Ç'avait été la réflexion de Mado, une copine du boulot. Ça les avait fait bien rire. Il avait des pieds très grands, très longs. Il était si grand, deux mètres? Ujine avait toujours aimé les hommes grands. Des pieds longs et minces, l'orteil médian qui dépassait les autres, est-ce qu'on appelait ça le pied égyptien? Ujine avait été tout de suite amoureuse de ses pieds. Bien sûr, lui n'en savait rien. Ujine se serait tuée plutôt que d'avouer quelque chose d'aussi bête. Surtout qu'elle détestait ses propres pieds, elle détestait leur forme, trop plats, la couleur pâle, les orteils boudinés. Elle se souvenait de la première fois qu'elle en avait entendu parler. Elle était avec des filles, au camp d'été, au bord de la rivière, il faisait chaud, personne n'avait de maillot, elle avait retroussé son pantalon pour laisser l'eau froide couler sur ses jambes. La mono était arrivée. Elle avait dit à Ujine : « Alors, mademoiselle-avec-les-gros-orteils? » Ujine avait mis une ou deux minutes à comprendre, mais les autres filles avaient attendu moins longtemps, elles répétaient : « Mademoiselle-gros-orteils! Mademoiselle-gros-orteils! » Pourquoi n'avait-elle pas oublié? Elle avait essayé de lutter. Elle avait porté des sandales à bouts fermés, des socquettes, elle ne mettait jamais de tapettes, de claquettes, elle disait, ça me fait mal, ça m'arrache la peau. Puis elle avait pris l'habitude de peindre ses ongles en rouge vif. Puisque j'ai de gros orteils, autant qu'on les voie tout de suite! Et puis ça lui était égal maintenant.

Samuel s'était excusé après le premier baiser. Il s'était

excusé après avoir fait l'amour. Au lieu de demander, comme les autres : « C'était bien ? », il avait dit timidement : « Je ne t'ai pas fait mal ? » C'était ridicule, mais Ujine avait été touchée. Tout était si différent avec lui.

Plus tard, elle avait eu cette révélation : « Mais il a des pieds d'artiste ! » Peut-être que ça expliquait tout — comme on aurait dit d'un pianiste, c'est normal, il a des mains faites pour ça. L'idée l'avait fait sourire.

La couleur de sa peau, mate, brune, presque entièrement dépourvue de poils. Elle détestait tellement les hommes qui ont des poils sur leurs orteils, sur le dessus des pieds, des cheveux sur les bras ! Ça n'avait aucune excuse ! Cette idée ridicule de la virilité. Samuel était viril, lui, il était très grand et très fort et très doux, solide avec des jambes épaisses, stable comme une statue, lent et calme, dans une foule il dominait d'une tête, il se penchait toujours un peu pour écouter, il ne parlait pas beaucoup. Il ne se mettait jamais en colère. Sauf une fois, à son travail à la banque, un sous-chef acariâtre, qui avait pris Samuel en grippe, jaloux, irascible. Samuel s'en fichait. Il laissait dire, il avait seulement son petit sourire moqueur, du genre, va toujours, tu ne m'impressionnes pas. Avec une des employées de bureau, une fille un peu lente, le bonhomme avait été odieux, il l'avait insultée, la fille pleurait, et Samuel s'était interposé. « Vous ne pouvez pas lui parler de cette façon ! » L'instant d'après, il avait été convoqué dans le bureau du sous-chef. Le sous-chef était assis dans son fauteuil de P-DG, derrière son énorme bureau, et d'un geste il avait montré à Samuel une chaise, pas n'importe laquelle,

une chaise extra-basse, un tabouret, au ras du sol. Sans obéir, Samuel était resté debout, et à la fin le sous-chef s'était décontenancé, il avait marché vers lui, menaçant, ses petits bras un peu écartés, avec ce drôle de tic dans les épaules, comme s'il essayait de se grandir, debout sur ses petits pieds, malgré ses talons il n'arrivait pas au-dessus de la poitrine de Samuel. Il avait bredouillé des phrases, il n'avait plus su quoi dire. À la fin, il avait conclu : « Ce sera tout pour le moment. »

Samuel a raconté la scène à Ujine, il avait son petit sourire triomphant, un peu vaniteux. C'était comique, a-t-elle pensé, de le prendre en flagrant délit d'orgueil, comme si d'être grand lui donnait une supériorité, comme s'il y était pour quelque chose. En même temps elle s'est sentie rassurée d'être avec lui, avec quelqu'un de si grand, qui n'avait peur de personne. Quelqu'un d'aussi simple. Elle était si petite, si faible, même le poids de sa tête lui semblait trop lourd à porter ! Elle n'a tout de même pas résisté au plaisir de le taquiner : « Comme c'est romantique ! Un monsieur qui prend la défense d'une pauvre jeune fille dans une banque ! » Elle a ajouté : « Elle était mignonne, au moins ? » Samuel lui a envoyé un de ses regards froids qui signifiait qu'il n'appréciait pas le persiflage. Mais elle s'est blottie contre lui, elle a appuyé sa tête sur la vaste poitrine. « Allez, je plaisante, je suis très fière de toi. » Lui bougonnait : « Ce n'est pas ce que je — et puis merde ! Tu m'énerves ! » Mais elle écoutait son cœur battre, des coups lents et profonds, il lui semblait qu'à côté de ce grand cœur le sien s'agitait à toute allure comme un grelot. Elle a

même pensé, ce cœur est à moi, il bat pour moi, mais c'était une phrase qu'elle ne pouvait pas lui dire. Il n'aurait pas aimé entendre ça, il voulait faire croire qu'il n'appartenait à personne.

Elle était plus légère. Elle n'avait jamais imaginé une chose pareille. Elle marchait dans les rues, au sortir de la Fac de droit, tout le monde se plaignait, il faisait chaud, il pleuvait, les chaussées étaient embouteillées, trop de monde sur les trottoirs, les cours étaient chiants, le prof de droit public ânonnait, son accent traînant, ses blagues à deux balles, sa façon de pencher la tête en lisant ses notes d'une voix monocorde, cet ennui qui flottait dans l'air comme une haleine lourde... Et Ujine, elle, avait envie de courir, de danser. « Qu'est-ce qui t'arrive ? T'as vraiment l'air en forme ! » La copine Micha la regardait d'un air sarcastique. Est-ce que ça n'était pas ridicule ? Tout ça pour un garçon, qu'elle ne connaissait pas depuis six mois, qui était entré dans sa vie sans qu'elle y prenne garde, et tout était changé ? Il n'y avait plus d'ennui, plus de tristesse ? Elle voulait raisonner. « Non, c'est juste le bonheur d'exister, rien d'autre. — Ça c'est original, c'est nouveau ! Alors on ne meurt plus, on n'est plus malade, tout va bien dans le monde ? — Juste un petit moment d'oubli, disons, un entracte, une saute d'humeur. — Un bonheur égoïste, quoi ? — Si tu veux, il faut être con pour ne pas être égoïste. »

Ça ne se raisonnait pas. Le sol devenu élastique, rebondissant, des millions de petits ressorts, des millions de bulles, les articulations chaudes, le courant électrique

qui traversait son corps, qui passait par ses jambes, ses bras, en marchant elle ouvrait et fermait les phalanges pour sentir sa liberté, elle souriait aux gens qui la prenaient pour une folle.

Elle s'étonnait. C'était donc ça, l'amour ? Comme une auréole au-dessus de sa tête, comme une carapace invisible, elle se sentait bien à l'abri, au cœur, elle se sentait invincible. Un fluide, elle dansait.

Elle allait aux rendez-vous sans arrière-pensée. Samuel ne voulait rien de sûr, rien de défini. Il disait : « Bon je t'appelle, hein ? » Mais il n'avait jamais donné son téléphone. Il disait qu'il n'avait pas de portable, il avait seulement un numéro au travail, à la banque, et pas question de l'appeler là. Peut-être qu'il se cachait derrière son travail, derrière ses parents. Il avait parlé un peu à Ujine de sa mère, une femme fragile, elle n'avait que lui depuis la maladie de son père. Ils vivaient dans le même immeuble, sur le même palier. Quand il tardait à rentrer le soir, elle appelait la police, les hôpitaux. C'était un peu absurde, un garçon de trente-cinq ans, mais en même temps Ujine était émue de son amour filial. Elle n'avait personne, sa mère morte, son père au diable, son frère ailleurs, pas intéressé. C'était peut-être pour cela qu'elle se sentait si légère, si libre. L'amour était un vent violent et elle avait toute la liberté pour résonner comme une harpe d'herbe, tourner comme un moulin à vent, sentir ce mouvement qui s'était déclenché au centre d'elle-même, un vertige au creux de son estomac, un pivot qui vibrait en tournant. C'était pour cela que le sol

était élastique, sous ses pas, sonore, tendu, sans une ride, sans un creux.

Les gens la regardaient maintenant, dans la rue. Au boulot, à la Fac, dans les magasins, elle sentait qu'elle attirait leurs regards. Quelque temps auparavant, elle aurait eu honte. Elle aurait cherché ce qui n'allait pas, elle se serait cachée derrière ses cheveux, elle aurait rabattu sur son visage la visière de sa casquette. Mais maintenant, elle courait au rendez-vous avec Samuel, ou simplement elle pensait très fort à lui, et les regards glissaient sur elle. Elle se sentait protégée par une aura, à l'intérieur d'un halo de lumière. Elle voyait le visage de l'aimé, l'éclat de ses yeux bruns, la ligne de ses sourcils et de son nez, l'ourlet parfait de ses lèvres.

Elle n'avait même pas besoin de se préparer. Elle était tout le temps prête, et quand son téléphone vibrait, la petite fenêtre s'éclairait, numéro inconnu, elle savait que c'était Samuel, elle courait à la rue de la Banque, le bistro d'en face, avec tous les jours les mêmes habitués, des vieux radoteurs et des jeunes abrutis par les jeux électroniques. Elle attendait et il arrivait. Il entra dans la salle, il la cherchait des yeux, et ça la faisait sourire parce qu'il ne la reconnaissait pas, il était le seul à ne pas la voir, il fallait qu'elle se lève et qu'elle fasse des gestes. Il buvait un café noir à la hâte, et puis ils parlaient ensemble, ils allaient chez elle. Il ne voulait pas qu'on les voie marcher ensemble, il se tenait un peu en retrait, sans parler. Elle pensait qu'elle aurait bien aimé qu'il la tienne par la main, qu'il l'enlace. Mais il avait imposé ses règles : « C'est mon quartier de travail ici, je déteste les

ragots et tout ça, tu comprends? » Au début, ça l'avait agacée, elle voulait dire des choses aigres : « Tu as honte? » Peut-être même qu'elle l'avait dit, mais lui ne cédait jamais. Elle aimait bien qu'il ait des règles, qu'il ne se laisse pas aller comme font les autres garçons, elle prenait cela pour un jeu. C'était du reste ce qu'il lui avait dit, un jour, comme un compliment : « Tu joues bien à mon jeu. » Sans comprendre pourquoi, ça lui avait fait plaisir.

C'était un tourbillon qui l'emportait. Elle aimait tellement ce sentiment de mouvement qu'elle ne ressentait plus la privation de sa liberté. Plus rien n'avait d'importance, l'honneur, l'amour-propre. À côté de ce sentiment il n'y avait que des vanités.

Quand son esprit se rembrunissait un instant, pour une remarque désobligeante, pour un rendez-vous manqué, pour un silence froid, pour une vétille, son corps, son cœur ne s'y arrêtaient pas, ses pieds volaient, l'emmenaient en courant jusqu'à la rue de la Banque, jusqu'au bistro d'en face, elle parcourait le chemin entre la Fac et l'autre côté de la ville sans fatigue, sans reprendre son souffle, sans ressentir le poids des bouquins dans son sac en bandoulière, ni le froid, ni la pluie, ni la soif. Le téléphone avait vibré trois fois, puis s'était éteint, et ce petit bruit disgracieux ouvrait un courant d'air dans son corps, relançait les ailes du moulin à vent.

Au bistro, certains jours, Samuel choisissait son menu, il lisait attentivement la carte crasseuse, une salade de thon, une tarte aux pommes, toujours un café serré, il interrogeait Ujine du regard, comme s'il avait oublié.

Mais elle n'avait pas faim, pas soif, elle se nourrissait de le regarder, elle mangeait et elle buvait de lui, le halo qui l'entourait, l'électricité qui brillait dans son corps, les étincelles dans ses cheveux noirs, tout cela que Samuel était le seul à ne pas concevoir. Jusqu'à la nausée.

Si elle disait : « J'ai un peu mal au cœur », il prenait cela à la lettre. « Alors tu préfères rentrer te reposer ? » Elle se ressaisissait. « Non, non, ça ira. » L'idée qu'il pourrait repartir lui avait donné le vertige.

Ujine avait fait quelque chose dont elle ne se serait pas crue capable. Elle était allée à l'hôtel avec Samuel, plusieurs fois. C'était minable et moche. Mais lui avait l'air d'aimer ça. Il avait dit : « Je ne peux pas aller chez toi. » Ujine n'avait pas demandé pourquoi. De toute façon il n'aurait pas répondu. Peut-être qu'il agissait ainsi pour qu'elle sache qu'il n'y avait pas de réponse.

Quand ils faisaient l'amour, il était différent. Il était tendre, il était doux et gentil. Elle aimait regarder son grand corps sans vêtements, sa peau mate, une peau de métis comme la sienne, elle reniflait l'odeur de sa peau. Cette odeur-là, il lui semblait qu'elle l'avait toujours connue, attendue, elle s'en pénétrait pour la garder avec elle quand ils étaient séparés, pour continuer à sentir sa présence, à s'en imprégner. Même dans les chambres d'hôtel minables (le grand miroir devant le lit, le distributeur de capotes, le nécessaire à parfums cheap, savons, crèmes, vaseline, mouchoirs en papier, le poste télé branché sur les chaînes X), elle capturait de la brillance, de la lumière, de la beauté, pour les jours et

les semaines à venir, pour préparer un long voyage dans l'absence.

Alors la vie était légère, aventureuse. Ujine (Samuel l'appelait « Jeans » parce qu'elle était vêtue la plupart du temps ainsi, une paire de jeans, une chemise blanche d'homme, des sandales à hauts talons, il lui avait dit un jour que c'était la tenue féminine la plus excitante pour un homme) changeait de peau, changeait de sang. Elle avait trouvé que ses pieds devenaient chauds, eux qui étaient ordinairement deux blocs glacés. Elle le lui avait fait remarquer : « Sens, je n'ai plus les pieds froids ! » Ça ne lui avait pas paru extraordinaire. « Moi non plus ! — Mais toi, tu as toujours les pieds chauds, les hommes ont toujours les pieds chauds et les femmes les pieds froids, tu ne savais pas ça ? » Il haussait les épaules : « Tu dis n'importe quoi, je connais des femmes qui ont les pieds chauds. » Elle l'avait interrompu : « Ah oui ? Et qui sont ces femmes, s'il te plaît ? » Elle faisait semblant de rire, de se dépitier, mais en réalité, chaque fois, elle sentait un pincement au cœur, une alarme, qui la sortait de son illusion, la ramenait à la réalité, à la solitude. C'était donc ça, la jalousie ? Quel ridicule.

Mais leurs pieds s'emmêlaient, et quand il posait sa plante large et musculeuse sur l'intérieur de sa cuisse, elle tressaillait de plaisir.

Il y avait des moments incroyablement longs, après une nuit, ils avaient fait l'amour, lui avec appétit, même un peu de violence, il voulait toucher et goûter toutes les parties de son corps, sans parler, il voulait y promener son sexe gonflé, décalotté, et quand il s'était déchargé

en dehors d'elle — depuis un moment il ne mettait plus de capotes —, il s'endormait tout de suite, bouche en haut, il ronflait même un peu à cause de son grand nez. Ujine l'aurait détesté. Mais elle s'abandonnait au sommeil, enroulée contre son grand corps, pour capter sa chaleur, l'emmagasiner au fond d'elle, c'était sa nourriture, son souffle. Et quand elle se réveillait, la première chose qu'elle faisait c'était de tâter à côté d'elle pour vérifier que Samuel était encore là dans le lit. Sans même ouvrir les yeux, elle le cherchait, elle posait son bras sur son torse, et elle se rendormait.

Et dans la lueur de l'aube ils restaient étendus sur le matelas, immobiles, silencieux. Lui dormant encore, mais d'un sommeil léger, elle à demi réveillée. Leurs pieds reposaient, ceux de Samuel sur le côté, la voûte fripée et les orteils écartés, Ujine les pieds bien droits, dégagés du drap, les orteils relevés pour mieux saisir la caresse du jour, pour fixer la surprise des rêves. Rien au monde ne pouvait troubler les amants, rien ne pouvait interrompre leur repos. C'était un temps extrait de l'infini, sans pensées, sans sagesse. Dehors, dans les rues et les avenues, encerclant la façade de stuc blanc de l'hôtel, les grondements reprenaient. Les bennes de ramassage des ordures faisant claquer leurs mâchoires, le cri ahant des autobus relâchant l'air comprimé, les raclements, les grincements, les claquements, et au plafond de leur chambre, comme reflété dans l'eau, le clignotement des feux de recul, et petit à petit un bruit doux, lointain, qui sortait de terre par les bouches d'aération, la rumeur des premiers banlieusards qui arrivaient en

ville, les autos aveugles qui cherchaient à tâtons des places de parking. Au loin, plus loin encore, irréel, peut-être un chant, ou une prière, ou un poste de radio qui ressuscitait dans une cuisine, tout seul, pour donner l'heure. Mais sur le matelas les pieds étaient encore immobiles pour quelques instants, calmes, un peu majestueux, blancs comme des statues de marbre, si proches de la mort.

## *Deux*

Elle n'en avait jamais assez. Elle était sans cesse sur le qui-vive, prête à tout.

« Il te fait marcher », avait commenté la copine Rita, au sortir des cours. Ça l'avait fait rire. Exactement, pensait Ujine, c'était ça, très exactement ça. Samuel la faisait marcher. Elle parcourait des lieues, chaque jour, pour faire se rejoindre tous les morceaux de sa vie, de chez elle à la Fac de droit, de la Fac à la rue de la Banque, puis l'hôtel (le plus souvent celui qui avait nom Merbeau, personne n'aurait pu deviner pourquoi), puis, quand Samuel retournait chez ses parents, à travers les rues sans but, là où la portaient ses pas perdus, le plus loin, dans des quartiers pas possibles, des zones sinistrées, sombres, dangereuses. Mais Ujine n'avait peur de rien, elle avait seulement besoin d'être dehors, de ne pas rester en place, de marcher dans la nuit zébrée de lumières, de flashes, de néons.

Cet été-là, elle a senti quelque chose d'étrange, de nouveau. Un vide qui grandissait, qui s'établissait en

elle. C'était étrange parce qu'elle savait depuis quelques jours qu'elle était enceinte. Elle savait même exactement comment c'était arrivé, ils étaient allés en voiture dans la campagne, très loin par une route de terre au milieu des champs d'eulalies, et pendant que la nuit tombait ils avaient fait l'amour dans la voiture, et elle s'était aperçue qu'elle n'avait pas sa boîte de préservatifs, lui n'en emportait jamais, et quand il s'était répandu en elle elle avait senti quelque chose de nouveau, une sorte de certitude, suivie tout de suite d'inquiétude. Un frisson qui l'avait parcourue de la nuque jusqu'à la plante des pieds. Plus tard elle avait voulu le lui dire, mais elle n'avait pas su comment, elle ne savait même pas en quels termes on dit ces choses-là, du genre : « Tiens, au fait, tu ne sais pas ? J'attends un enfant. » Ou sur un ton faussement enjoué : « Chéri, je suis *si* heureuse !... » Dramatique peut-être : « Tu m'aimes ? J'ai vraiment besoin que tu m'aimes... »

De la fatigue. Dès qu'elle était dehors, dans la rue, elle titubait, elle s'appuyait aux murs, elle avait le vertige. Ses pieds s'écartaient légèrement, comme s'ils savaient, eux, qu'Ujine avait déjà à porter un poids supplémentaire, ils s'appuyaient bien à plat sur le sol, en canard, comme on dit, et Ujine avait dû remplacer ses escarpins à hauts talons par des ballerines, des tennis, ou le plus souvent des tonges. Elle avait besoin de sentir la terre sous ses pieds, ferme et solide.

En même temps, elle avait arrêté de fumer, sans y avoir réfléchi. Samuel s'étonnait : « Ah bon, tu as décidé ça pourquoi ? » Lui continuait d'allumer tranquillement

ses cigarettes, il n'avait pas vraiment envie d'entendre des explications. Elle aurait pu sauter sur l'occasion, lui en donner la raison, mais elle ne l'a pas fait, peut-être parce qu'il s'en fichait qu'elle fume ou pas. Elle a essayé : « Tu ne veux pas t'arrêter un peu, en même temps que moi, ça m'aiderait à tenir le coup. » Il a répondu : « Et pourquoi j'arrêteraï, ça me fait plaisir de fumer et je m'en fous de mourir. » Il répétait quelquefois à ce sujet : « Ne plus boire d'alcool, ne plus fumer, et mourir en pleine santé ! » Ujine s'est sentie abandonnée. « Et pour me faire plaisir ? » En même temps, elle savait bien ce que Samuel répondrait, toujours sa formule pessimiste : « On naît seul, on meurt seul, on dort seul, c'est la seule chose dont on soit sûr. »

Elle était si fatiguée. À Charlotte, une copine de Fac rencontrée par hasard, elle s'est confiée. « La seule chose que j'aimerais, c'est être quelqu'un d'autre. » La fille l'avait regardée sans comprendre. Ujine n'avait pas osé continuer, c'était trop intime. La gynéco, elle, n'était pas allée par quatre chemins. « Vous êtes encore à moins de trois mois, on peut arrêter si c'est ça que vous voulez. »

C'était très simple en effet. Il suffisait de dire oui, de prendre rendez-vous à la clinique. Pourquoi ne l'a-t-elle pas fait ? Elle n'en savait rien. La fatigue, peut-être, la solitude. Ou bien le besoin d'aller plus loin, par curiosité, d'aller pour une fois jusqu'au bout, puisque ça dépendait d'elle, de personne d'autre.

Ses pas la portaient chaque jour à la rue de la Banque, par habitude. Elle attendait le moment où Samuel sortirait du bureau, entre deux rendez-vous, l'air las, la cra-

vate en tire-bouchon, deux taches de sueur sur sa chemise, sous les bras. Elle laissait partir les collègues, et lui attendait au bord du trottoir qu'elle vienne le rejoindre. Elle l'écoutait se plaindre, elle buvait chaque phrase, les mots retentissaient deux ou trois fois dans son esprit, elle pensait qu'elle était comme ces femmes mariées qui accueillent leur mari sur le pas de la porte, pour entendre leurs histoires de travail. Elle savait qu'elle l'écouterait quand il ne serait plus là, elle s'allongerait toute seule sur son lit et elle répéterait dans sa tête les bribes de conversation.

« ... j'en ai marre de tout ça, j'en ai marre de leurs têtes, de leurs coiffures... tu sais, je regardais tout à l'heure le type qui est assis juste devant moi au bureau, il me tourne le dos, je regardais sa nuque... Il perd déjà ses cheveux, il n'a même pas quarante ans, je pensais que je serai comme lui dans quelques années, l'ennui m'aura bouffé, m'aura tassé, tous les jours tous les jours, suivre la même ornière, faire les mêmes gestes. »

Mais pourquoi ? Ujine inventait les réponses, les objections, tout ce qu'elle n'avait pas osé lui dire. Tout ça n'est rien, rien du tout. C'est le détail, c'est une ride à la surface de l'existence, ça ne vaut même pas la peine qu'on en parle, ça n'est rien quand on partage tout le reste, quand on sait ce qui est vrai, ce qui est beau dans la vie, chaque seconde qui passe. Il n'y a pas d'ennui, pas de routine, si on vit avec quelqu'un, on partage tout ça et on n'est pas seule, jamais seule, c'est un instant dans la vie, un instant immense...

Pourquoi est-ce qu'elle attendait autant ? Lui, ne la

regardait même pas. Il buvait son expresso, sa cigarette fumait au bout de ses doigts, le vent chaud emportait la fumée vers le ciel. Il regardait la fumée, la suivait des yeux. Elle voulait sourire, dire quelque chose de drôle, d'intelligent, comme elle savait faire autrefois, ces petits mots d'humour, jeux de mots, qui scintillaient comme des lucioles et qui attiraient autour d'elle des amis, des filles de la Fac, des aventureux en quête de flirt qu'elle envoyait ensuite balader. Mais à présent, elle sentait un nœud dans sa gorge, dans son esprit, un vide dans son ventre. C'était la faute de l'enfant qui s'installait, qui prenait son énergie. Elle restait sur son lit, elle regardait la nuit venir à travers les lattes des stores. Elle sentait des larmes couler sur sa joue, mouiller l'oreiller, elle ne savait pas d'où venait toute cette eau.

Un soir, Ujine a commis l'irréparable. Samuel était parti, missionné par la banque, des affaires à l'étranger. Il avait seulement envoyé un message sur son téléphone, quelques mots. Comme à son habitude. Les mots, c'est juste pour communiquer. Les actes plutôt, disait-il, vivre dans l'instant. Avant de partir, un adieu : fais comme si je ne reviendrai jamais. Mieux vaut la liberté.

Alors, après des jours passés à attendre, pour rien, pour personne, Ujine est sortie de sa torpeur. Il faisait très chaud, les orages tournoyaient autour de la ville. Une rumeur de moteurs, de tonnerre, la vibration des trains souterrains.

Maintenant, elle ressentait de l'impatience, du besoin. Plus de mots, agir. Samuel l'avait dit. Je dois faire comme

s'il ne reviendra jamais. Comme lorsqu'on regarde à l'arrière d'un train le pays se dérouler à l'envers. Cet arbre, cette maison, ces enfants, ce chien, je les vois, je ne les reverrai jamais. Elle ne chercherait pas d'excuses. Un vide à combler, une bulle qui se gonflait, pleine de reflets et de mirages.

Ujine s'est habillée, pour la première fois depuis des jours et des jours, comme pour aller à un rendez-vous d'affaires. Le style que Samuel aimait bien, jupe tailleur grise, chemise blanche, escarpins à hauts talons. Elle a coupé sa frange, elle a mis les boucles d'oreilles en corail rose que Samuel lui avait données pour son anniversaire, un rouge à lèvres qui va avec, une touche de sent-bon sur le cou. Le miroir lui a renvoyé l'image d'une jolie fille qui n'a pas froid aux yeux, ses yeux verts en amande, sa bouche à la lèvre inférieure gourmande, les incisives brillantes, couleur de perle. Elle se souvient de la première fois que Samuel l'a présentée à ses collègues de la banque, une grande femme, la cinquantaine un peu sèche, qui l'a examinée : « Mais c'est qu'elle est ravissante ! Est-ce qu'elle est actrice ? » Rien que pour cela Samuel n'a jamais voulu qu'une telle rencontre se renouvelle, il déteste ce genre de remarques, il avait répondu : « Non non, c'est une étudiante tout simplement. » Plus tard il avait dit, une actrice, et puis quoi encore ? Est-ce que je sors avec des actrices moi ? Je suis un petit employé de banque, j'ai une vie ordinaire. Mais Ujine aimait bien le rendre jaloux. Cela la faisait rire qu'il puisse être jaloux.

Dans le métro qui roulait vers l'aéroport, les gens la regardaient un peu sournoisement, les femmes détail-

laient ses habits, commentaient ses chaussures bleu électrique, son sac en vinyle bleu, ses boucles d'oreilles. Un homme, la quarantaine fatiguée, un peu bellâtre, avait son regard fixé sur elle, elle sentait ses yeux qui glissaient le long de son corps, sur ses seins, son ventre, ses pieds, remontaient, redescendaient. Elle a pensé aller vers lui, lui parler durement : « Alors, vous êtes satisfait ? Vous voulez que je bouge un peu, que je tourne ? » Mais c'était bon aussi de n'être plus qu'une image, de n'avoir plus rien à l'intérieur, plus d'angoisse, plus de bulle qui gonfle.

Ujine est restée debout au long des quatorze stations qui la séparaient de l'aérogare. Quand elle est entrée dans le hall, elle a compris que c'était sans espoir. La foule, les lumières, la queue devant les guichets d'enregistrement, elle ne pourrait pas contrôler la situation. Elle connaissait le jour, il reviendrait ce soir-là. Rien d'autre. Samuel ne disait jamais où il allait, il détestait qu'on l'accompagne, qu'on vienne le chercher. Il disait toujours : « Les voyages sont pénibles, les adieux ridicules. » Il avait des idées sur tout. Il disait aussi : « Partir pour ne jamais revenir, ça c'est l'idéal. »

Ujine aimait les aéroports. Pour elle qui ne voyageait jamais, c'était un lieu où on est déjà parti avant même de partir. Elle aimait le brouhaha, les annonces incompréhensibles précédées d'un grelot, le tonnerre lointain des avions en train de décoller qui ébranlait le sol et les vitres, le regard égaré des partants, troublé de ceux qui restent, la lassitude des revenants. Tout ce que Samuel détestait. Il en parlait comme d'un enfer organisé. Lui,

ce qu'il aimait, c'était rester chez lui à lire un bouquin, ou bien aller à moto à toute vitesse à travers les champs, sur les routes sinueuses de montagne. Il ne disait jamais où il allait. Une fois il a commenté : « Je voudrais mourir à moto comme Lawrence d'Arabie. »

Et toutes ces villes, tous ces pays dont les noms s'affichaient sur les moniteurs, Séoul, Tokyo, Osaka, Guam, San Francisco, Denver, Rome, Berlin, Abu Dhabi, Bangkok, Angkor, Manille, Maurice, Mexico. C'était comme si Samuel allait partout. Ujine courait, à gauche puis à droite, vers les portes d'arrivée, elle essayait d'apercevoir les visages, de reconnaître une stature, un vêtement, une couleur de cheveux, une démarche. Elle avait acheté au stand de journaux un bloc et un marqueur, elle voulait écrire en gros un nom, pas Samuel bien sûr, il ne lui pardonnerait jamais, un nom, n'importe quel nom, un mot qu'il verrait de loin et qu'il reconnaîtrait, MERBEAU, le nom de l'hôtel où ils allaient, ou bien MILES DAVIS, parce qu'il aimait bien, ou WINGS, parce que c'est là qu'il l'emmenait parfois manger un sandwich en sortant du bureau. Mais sa main n'arrivait pas à écrire, elle tremblait comme si c'était une décision capitale. Alors ses pieds l'emmenaient malgré elle d'un bout à l'autre de l'aérogare, elle écoutait le bruit de ses talons claquer sur le carrelage, clac, clac, clac, cela résonnait dans sa tête, dans son corps, cela lui donnait le vertige, mais ses pieds ne pouvaient plus s'arrêter, il fallait qu'ils marchent, qu'ils aillent plus vite que tout le monde, pour ne pas rater un instant, une arrivée de passagers.

L'après-midi est passé, puis le soir. À travers les grandes glaces de l'aérogare, Ujine a vu la nuit tomber, les lumières roses des lampadaires s'allumer, et les phares des voitures qui coulaient régulièrement le long du trottoir, ralentissaient, déversaient des gens, repartaient en montrant les feux de frein et de position, les clignotants, certains rapides tic-tic-tic, d'autres lents et lourds, kitong, kitong. Passaient les bus climatisés, les navettes, les camionnettes d'entretien. Parfois une voiture de police, très lentement et soupçonneuse, frôlant le trottoir à la manière d'un squalo.

Pour lutter contre la fatigue, Ujine s'est assise à la buvette, non loin d'une porte de contrôle. Elle a bu un thé vert très chaud dans un gobelet en carton, à petites lampées. La serveuse lui a parlé, quelque chose concernant manger, ou peut-être encore un peu d'eau chaude pour le thé? Ujine la regardait sans comprendre, elle devait avoir l'air tellement perdu que la femme a ajouté, sa voix était douce, comme quelqu'un qui éprouve de la sympathie, ou de la pitié, vous ne vous sentez pas bien, mademoiselle? Ujine a répondu vaguement, un geste de la main, elle a bredouillé, si si, tout va très bien. À ce moment-là, elle ne savait plus pourquoi elle était là. Ses pieds avaient tellement gonflé qu'elle avait ôté ses escarpins, posé son sac à main sur la chaise à côté d'elle. Les gens à la table voisine faisaient du bruit, une famille, des obèses plus ou moins, l'homme et la femme se disputaient, à propos d'argent ou d'autre chose, et le garçon de quatorze ou quinze ans, déjà gros comme ses parents, regardait Ujine sournoisement, un pli sarcastique sur sa

bouche enflée. Puis il y a eu vraiment des éclats de voix, comme si ces gens allaient se battre comme des chiens, et la serveuse s'est arrêtée pour regarder. Puis le couple s'est réconcilié, ils se sont même embrassés, c'était pathétique et un peu dégoûtant, et la famille a fini par s'en aller. Et là, le café est redevenu vide, parce qu'il devait être tard dans la nuit, et les passagers étaient moins nombreux, quelques retardataires qui couraient après leurs chariots, qui tiraient leurs valises dont une roue était folle et s'agitait sur le carrelage en faisant un tac-tac-tac de mitraillette, une sorte de train fantôme zigzaguant entre les obstacles, filant vers les portes obscures. Ujine a appuyé sa tête sur ses bras croisés sur le plateau de la table. La tasse de thé avait refroidi depuis un bon moment, le silence s'installait dans l'aérogare, Ujine entendait distinctement le grésillement des barres de néon au plafond.

Ensuite il n'y a plus eu personne dans le hall. À la terrasse du café, la serveuse empilait les chaises, épongeait le comptoir, ficelait les sacs-poubelle remplis de cannettes de soda et de cartons de sandwiches. De temps en temps, elle jetait un coup d'œil vers Ujine, l'air de dire : je te comprends, je connais ta tristesse, il ne viendra pas ce soir... L'air d'une chanson, *Tombe la neige...* Est-ce qu'elle l'a sifflotée en balayant ? Ujine la détestait de son faux apitoiement, ce truc entre femmes, est-ce qu'elle demandait quelque chose ? Est-ce qu'elle avait quoi que ce soit en commun avec cette fille de salle, humiliée, dolente, cette espèce d'éternelle victime confite dans sa soumission aux hommes, incapable de s'en

sortir, incapable d'un autre sentiment que la culpabilité? Sa méchanceté lui donnait le vertige. Oui, j'aime un homme, il ne vaut pas tripette, mais je suis la seule responsable. J'ai mal au cœur et au ventre, j'ai les jambes qui flageolent et c'est comique, c'est mon bégaiement, ma glissade sur une peau de banane, sur une merde de chien. Je tombe mais je sais en rire, alors que toi... Ujine a rassemblé ses forces, elle s'est levée, elle a enfilé ses chaussures, elle s'est même étirée, pour montrer qu'elle s'était beaucoup ennuyée, à moitié endormie. Elle a repoussé la chaise, elle est partie lentement, son sac en bandoulière. Elle était sûre que les yeux de la serveuse étaient fixés sur elle, observaient son dos. Il ne fallait pas trébucher, pas montrer de faiblesse. Elle s'est dirigée vers une porte et elle est sortie.

Dehors, dans la nuit, c'est le vide qui la saisit. Le vent souffle, le ciel est opaque, d'une couleur rose inexistante.

Au sommet de la tour, il fait encore chaud malgré la saison. Ujine sent ses poils se hérissier, sur ses bras, ses jambes, le long de son dos. Une piqure glacée sous les aisselles. Elle est arrivée comme une automate, il lui semble que ce sont ses pieds qui l'ont portée jusque-là, les talons des escarpins bloqués aux contremarches de l'escalier de béton qui résonne d'un bruit de métal.

L'hôtel est très haut, trente-trois étages, terminés par le toit-terrasse. À la réception, le concierge n'a pas fait de problème. Avec son tailleur gris, son sac, ses escarpins à hauts talons, le bonhomme a cru reconnaître une sil-

houette familière, en prenant l’empreinte de la carte bancaire, il a commenté : « ... une bonne nuit de repos après un long vol... » Ujine a souri, du sourire qu’elle trouvait le plus digne d’une hôtesse de l’air. Samuel aimait bien raconter pour la rendre jalouse ses aventures avec des hôtesse de l’air, c’est tout ce qu’il ramenait de ses voyages, à New York, à Abu Dhabi, à Tokyo. En plein ciel. *Fuck a duck and learn to fly!* Elle a ricané en soufflant à cause des marches trop raides.

L’escalier a débouché sur le toit d’un coup, elle a dû forcer pour pousser la porte de métal contre le vent, une fouettée d’air humide qui contrastait avec l’atmosphère confinée de la cage d’escalier. Des odeurs, des quantités d’odeurs, comme dans une forêt. Ujine ne s’attendait pas aux odeurs, elle essayait de les déchiffrer, goudron chaud, kérosène des moteurs d’avion bien sûr, et aussi odeur de la mer, très lointaine, mêlée aux champs d’eulalies de la campagne, une odeur lourde et sucrée de marécage.

Ujine a retiré posément de son sac toutes les bouteilles. Ce sont de petits flacons d’alcool, provenant du frigo de la chambre, des échantillons plutôt, de quoi remplir un verre. Vodka, gin, Kahlúa, des liqueurs vertes et jaunes, de l’alcool blanc dans des bouteilles vertes ventruées, du saké, du soju, qu’elle boit d’un trait, parce que c’est doux et sucré. Elle s’est assise par terre, les jambes de côté pour ne pas déchirer la jupe du tailleur. Elle a abandonné les escarpins devant la porte du toit, le sol est recouvert d’une peau élastique et verte, très fraîche, quelque chose de doux qui fait penser à un

animal marin, elle aime marcher pieds nus sur ce toit. Elle se sent libre. Elle pense à la mer, quand elle marchait sur la plage à marée basse, et qu'elle regardait les empreintes se refermer derrière elle.

Elle sirote les petites bouteilles, l'une après l'autre. Ça la fait sourire, elle se souvient maintenant que Samuel lui avait dit un soir où ils buvaient dans un Karaoké du centre, toi tu tiens bien l'alcool, tu sais boire comme un homme ! Lui, après deux verres, avait la tête qui tournait, il devenait sentimental, il disait n'importe quoi, sa tête tombait sur l'épaule d'Ujine ! Ses yeux étaient bizarres, comme s'il avait quatre prunelles !

Elle s'est calé le dos contre le bloc des cheminées. Le compresseur de la clim fait vibrer le sol. Devant elle, par-dessus le muret, la ville est étendue, la ville qui ne dort jamais. Loin, au-delà des autoroutes éclairées en jaune, les boulevards extérieurs, les premiers immeubles et, plus loin encore, le scintillement des maisons, les tours, les usines à gaz, les gares de triage, les flèches des églises soulignées de néons rouges. Les taches aveugles des jardins publics, les terrains vagues, la vallée sombre du fleuve.

Ujine imagine que dans toute cette ville il y a quelqu'un qui pense à elle, peut-être. Samuel, petit comme une tête d'épingle, comme une amibe. Si elle appelait, si elle criait son nom, est-ce qu'il l'entendrait ? Si elle pensait à lui très fort, en serrant ses tempes entre ses mains, est-ce qu'il se retournerait dans son sommeil, est-ce qu'il regarderait vers l'horizon ? Est-ce qu'il la verrait dans ses rêves ?

Tout d'un coup elle se plie sur elle-même, elle reçoit un coup à l'épigastre. Elle ne s'y attendait pas, le souvenir revient avec violence, la submerge, la fait étouffer. Elle geint un peu, elle sent les larmes qui montent de tout son corps et débordent de ses paupières, coulent dans sa bouche. Avec Samuel, ils sont sur cette route qui serpente dans la brume le long de la mer du Nord, à travers des collines d'eulalies. Elle se souvient, elle ne connaissait pas leur nom, elle appelait ça des herbes, et Samuel avait expliqué, il avait même donné le nom latin, ce sont des plantes de la Chine ou du Japon. Eulalie, elle aimait bien ce nom très doux. Samuel a arrêté la voiture dans une clairière, au bout d'un chemin de terre. À travers le pare-brise piqué de gouttelettes, ils regardent ensemble les écharpes de brume qui circulent au ras des plantes. La lueur du jour qui se lève éclaire le ciel d'un éclat multiplié par les gouttes de rosée. Les hautes tiges sont immobiles, légères, fusantes, exultantes. Il n'y a pas un bruit. Ujine entend la vibration de son cœur, et elle pose son oreille sur la poitrine de Samuel pour écouter le rythme qui bat à la même cadence, un coup court, un coup long... C'est un moment de bonheur comme elle croit n'en avoir jamais connu avant. Elle pense à toutes ces années de solitude, à la mort de sa mère à l'hôpital, à l'angoisse de devoir travailler, de devoir trouver une place dans le monde. Elle ne dit rien, lui aussi se tait, elle sait qu'elle l'aime et qu'il l'aime, elle en est sûre, rien ne pourra jamais effacer cet instant, hors du monde, hors du temps.

Ce n'est pas le souvenir qui la submerge. C'est une

sensation enfouie depuis l'enfance, une brûlure, une souffrance, une joie, une remontée du tréfonds. C'est relié à la vie qui est installée dans son ventre, cette chose qui s'accroche à elle et lui donne le vertige.

Ujine est debout maintenant au bord du précipice. Elle écarte un peu les bras de son corps, comme des ailes à peine soulevées. La lumière de l'aurore est devant elle, déjà, elle entre jusqu'au fond de ses yeux et la baigne d'un appel irrésistible. Je viens, pense-t-elle, je vais venir. Elle sent ce regard insistant autour d'elle, un regard sans yeux qui la pénètre et la transperce, elle voit dans le ciel nu un visage qui se dessine, un pâle et lisse visage sans traits, pareil à la lune en train de naître. C'est une voix, un appel, pour rejoindre l'infini, être libre, voler, sans mémoire, sans souffrance, suspendue entre ciel et terre, entre deux vies, jusqu'au rêve.

Elle est sur le rebord du toit. Ses orteils s'agrippent avec force au ciment, elle sent sous chaque phalange le granulé piquant et froid, rendu friable par les pluies et les vents qui passent sur l'immeuble depuis sa construction. Dans l'esprit d'Ujine, dans sa tête, déjà le grand saut vers le parking, son corps disloqué ouvert, le sang qui envahit sa gorge et couvre ses yeux d'une taie écarlate, le sang qui coule en ruisseaux entre les roues des voitures arrêtées. Tout cela qui fait un bruit, non pas un bruit, mais une clôture mince qui entoure le ciel, la mer, l'aérogare et même les champs d'eulalies.

Ses pieds refusent. Les doigts se sont écartés, ils sont forts, indéracinables. Ils ne lâcheront pas le rebord de ciment. Ils jettent leur onde jusqu'au centre du corps

## *Trois*

Ujine doit se défaire maintenant. Elle ne l'a pas décidé. Est-ce qu'on décide rien quand on est seule? Mais elle n'est plus vraiment seule à présent. Elle n'est pas encore une maman, elle est double, quelque chose a changé en elle, elle ressent une gravité, une lenteur. Plus question de s'étourdir, d'aller dehors la nuit à la recherche du bonheur, ou du désespoir, plus question d'aller au hasard, à travers les collines, monter les escaliers jusqu'à en avoir mal. Tout cela, c'était bon avant. Avant quoi? Elle s'est posé la question, elle l'a écartée comme une mouche importune. « Alors, comment vont les amours? » Les filles, au cours de droit commercial, toujours aussi inquisitrices. Micha, Charlotte. Rita. Toutes les mêmes, avec leurs histoires, leurs complots, leurs ragots. « Tu sais quoi, ma chérie? Tout est dans la manipulation. Tu comprends? Ou tu manipules, ou c'est toi qui es manipulée. » C'était simple en effet. Il n'y avait qu'à choisir.

Tout paraît dérisoire. L'attente, la colère, l'orgueil blessé. Cette folie qu'a commise Ujine, aller frapper à la

porte des parents de Samuel, le regard effaré de la vieille dame, la voix tremblante du père du fond de l'appartement, cette fragilité, cette banalité. Une odeur de cuisine lourde, du coq au vin, du bœuf en ragoût. « Non, mademoiselle, il n'habite pas ici, mais il vient tous les jours, ou il téléphone, laissez un message, nous le lui donnerons, quel est votre nom, je vous prie ? » Ujine a balbutié, toujours mauvaise pour inventer un nom, pour mentir : « Merbeau, Mlle Merbeau, merci, madame, désolée de vous avoir dérangée. » Quand le jeu n'est plus un jeu, devient un pari stupide, un ressassement, une grimace, et qu'il n'y a pas, qu'il n'y aura pas de réponse. « Non, non, merci, pas la peine d'écrire un message, c'est sans importance, excusez-moi. » La vieille dame, son bloc-notes à la main, son crayon à bille. Ujine a eu le temps de lire un en-tête au nom d'une compagnie d'avions, un cadeau du Voyageur sans doute, est-ce que ça provenait d'une de ses hôtesse de l'air ? Elle n'a pas attendu que la vieille dame ferme la porte, elle a pressé le bouton d'appel, mais elle n'a pas attendu que l'ascenseur arrive, elle a dévalé les escaliers, les huit étages, mais la minuterie s'est arrêtée, elle a dû descendre les deux derniers étages à tâtons, le cœur battant, les mains moites. Ça ne s'oublie pas.

Il ne fallait pas laisser revenir le vide. Chaque minute, chaque seconde compte. Il faut marcher, aller aux cours, à la Fac de droit, à la chambre de commerce, chercher du travail, s'inscrire à la gym, aux visites de musées, aux randonnées, au chant, aux ateliers. Marcher, parler, écouter, de toutes ses forces, du matin au soir, même la

nuit, sans s'arrêter, sans penser, monter-descendre, enregistrer, compter, diviser, juger, sans jamais attendre. L'attente est un monstre vorace, cannibale. Il guette, cherche sa proie. Dans le vide se cache le visage du tyran, du grand manipulateur. Le rayer, le détruire. Apprendre à haïr ce qu'on a adoré.

D'abord, ne plus se soumettre. Ujine se souvient du temps où elle ne s'éloignait jamais de son téléphone de peur de manquer un appel de Samuel. Tout lui revient maintenant. Morceau par morceau, un tissu de mensonges et d'humiliations. Les soirées où elle est couchée sur son matelas, elle écoute la rumeur de la ville, les klaxons, les rugissements d'une moto (la moto de T.E. Lawrence sur laquelle il a cherché la mort), les sirènes des ambulances qui viennent de partout à la fois. Le téléphone posé sur le drap à côté d'elle, elle regarde le boîtier noir, l'écran aveugle. Il ne s'allume pas, il ne veut pas vibrer. « Allez, sonne ! Je t'en prie, maintenant, là, sonne ! Je compte jusqu'à cent et tu sonnes ! Je vais prendre une douche, sans me presser, je vais me laver les cheveux, et quand je sortirai de la salle de bains, je verrai le signal d'appel. Je descends dans la cour, je jette le sac-poubelle, je fais le tour de l'immeuble, comme si j'avais quelque chose à vérifier, je remonte — tiens ! Le signal d'appel ! » Elle se souvient de l'air supérieur de Samuel : « Il ne faut jamais attendre, jamais rien espérer. » Ou bien, une autre fois, elle ne se rappelle plus pourquoi : « Le monde ne répond pas à tes désirs. » Un soir, ils étaient ensemble en haut d'une colline, dans la belle auto de Samuel, le ciel était immense, un avion venait de

décoller. Ujine avait-elle parlé d'avenir, ou simplement s'ils devaient se revoir le lendemain ? Samuel regardait la trace de l'avion. « C'est comme s'il suffisait de vouloir très fort qu'il tombe ! » Ujine avait ressenti une douleur près du cœur, un petit coup de poignard. Elle n'avait rien répondu, mais maintenant elle s'insurge. Quelle connerie ! Elle le dit à voix haute, peut-être que ça fait se retourner des gens dans la rue : « Quelle connerie ! Pourquoi je croirais que je peux faire tomber un avion ! » Quelle conne j'ai été ! Tout ce qu'elle n'a pas osé dire. Tout ce qu'elle a laissé dire. Ce qu'elle aurait dû dire.

Comme ce n'est pas facile de ne pas répondre au téléphone, Ujine a changé son numéro. Plus trop rien à attendre maintenant. Mais ça n'est pas suffisant. Elle veut comprendre ce qui s'est passé, comment elle s'est laissé prendre au piège. Elle essaie de remonter le cours de l'histoire. Ainsi elle pourra effacer les blessures, brouiller les traces. Les voir d'abord, avec netteté, les effacer ensuite. Toutes ces mises à l'épreuve, ces bassesses. Tout ce qu'elle a cru être un jeu, avant de comprendre qu'elle était jouée. Est-ce que l'amour suffit à cacher les offenses ? Ou bien ce n'est pas de l'amour, mais de l'amour-propre. Elle repère ses souvenirs, elle voudrait les écrire dans un livre de comptes, elle appellerait ça *Assets and Liabilities*.

Voyons, par exemple. Un rendez-vous, elle a attendu sous la pluie froide, devant le métro, parce que Samuel avait envoyé un message : *Sortie 2, 15 heures*.

Elle revient à cet endroit, pour vérifier, pour comprendre. Il y a toujours autant de monde, c'est la station

près de la Bourse, avec une foule affairée qui se bouscule. Devant le métro les marchands à la sauvette, les bandes d'étudiantes qui ressemblent à des sauterelles. Le mendiant qui fait la manche, et toujours cet homme sans âge, ses cheveux teints en noir, sa figure blême, il reste debout contre le mur, il regarde passer les filles, elles lui ont donné un sobriquet, elles l'appellent Beethoven. Il a cette expression figée, la légende raconte qu'il a perdu sa fiancée autrefois, et qu'il continue à l'attendre à cette même station, tous les jours. Ujine est revenue à la sortie n° 2, maintenant elle ressent une sorte de rage à penser qu'elle a ressemblé à Beethoven, elle aussi, à attendre debout, les cheveux mouillés, à guetter l'arrivée du fiancé qui ne vient pas. Parce que Samuel n'est pas venu au rendez-vous. Mais s'il avait été là? De l'autre côté de la rue, caché par un pilier, ou bien du côté de la sortie n° 1, ou encore en bas des escaliers, près des guichets automatiques? Son cœur bat fort dans son cou, elle sent la colère qui l'envahit. De chacun de ces points, on voit parfaitement la sortie n° 2.

Voyons autre chose. Ce coup de téléphone, un matin, alors qu'elle sort du cours avec Micha et d'autres filles, elles doivent faire le point sur la préparation de l'exposé sur *King Lear*. Elle a quand même répondu à l'appel, elle a dit : « Ne quitte pas, je te prends tout de suite. » Aux filles elle a dit : « Commandez les sashimis, du thé vert, je reviens tout de suite. » Elle sort de la cafète, c'est trop bruyant, elle déborde d'une onde bienfaisante en approchant ses lèvres du téléphone, elle l'entend, sa voix cassante, méchante : « Je t'ai déjà dit, je déteste que tu

parles à quelqu'un d'autre quand je te téléphone. Je te laisse à tes occupations. » Puis le silence, elle a beau essayer de rappeler, il n'y a personne au bout du fil. Ce n'est pas un silence qu'on peut rompre. C'est l'éternel (ou presque) silence mécanique d'une communication interrompue. Est-ce à moi qu'il a fait ça? Et tout de suite elle donne la réponse à haute voix : « Eh bien oui, c'est à toi, tu l'as mérité, tu as accepté! » Ne plus rien accepter désormais, plus rien de ce type, plus rien de n'importe quel autre type.

Voyons encore. Lui reviennent les manquements d'égards, les prétendues leçons de la vie. C'est bien ça qu'il appelait le Jeu. Elle a cru que c'était un jeu qu'il avait inventé pour elle, ce garçon si grand, si sûr de lui, elle était alors sa jeune fille sans expérience, sans famille, sans profession, qu'il prendrait sous tutelle et à qui il enseignerait les lois de l'existence. Une danse dans laquelle lui était le guide, elle le modèle. La seule danse qu'il aimait, le tango, et elle l'avait suivi dans cette boîte bizarre, au sous-sol d'un immeuble, où des hommes d'un certain âge virevoltaient avec des toutes jeunes femmes. Il lui avait dit qu'il fallait qu'elle s'abandonne, qu'elle se laisse porter. Maintenant elle comprend cette danse, pourquoi il aime tant cela. Une danse guindée, dramatique, et la musique du bandonéon qui grinçait dans les haut-parleurs. Elle n'y était allée qu'une seule fois. Est-ce qu'il y allait toujours? Mais la colère lui a fait tout oublier, les pas, la musique, et même l'endroit où cela se cachait. Peut-être qu'il n'y est allé qu'une seule fois, pour lui montrer, ce jeu dont il édictait les règles,

et la première règle était qu'il n'aurait jamais à les justifier.

Changer le lieu du rendez-vous à sa guise, téléphoner, envoyer un Texto concis, à sa manière : « RDV HÔTEL HILTON 13 h 30 ». Et Ujine courait, toutes affaires cessantes, bus, métro et, quand le temps manquait, taxi. Arrivait haletante, le cœur battant, les mains moites. Plusieurs fois Samuel était déjà là, l'air de s'ennuyer, les mains dans les poches, discutant avec les hôtessees d'accueil, il ne l'avait même pas reconnue de loin — ah, c'est vrai, ce garçon est très myope, mais pourquoi ne met-il pas ses lunettes? Plusieurs fois aussi, il n'était pas là. Le hall de l'hôtel, immense, encombré de gens et vide. À la réception, personne ne le connaît. Les hôtessees — mais ce ne sont sûrement pas les mêmes — la regardent, la toisent, peut-être même qu'elles ricanent tout bas. Que faire? C'est vrai, le Jeu interdit qu'on demande, qu'on pose des questions. Juste cette règle, que Samuel a énoncée une fois pour toutes : « Je n'attends jamais. Trois minutes après l'heure du rendez-vous, je m'en vais. » Pourquoi trois minutes? Pour le cas où on n'aurait pas l'heure de l'horloge atomique?

Mais qu'est-ce qui manque si fort à Ujine? Est-ce le rendez-vous, ou bien ce bref instant de bonheur quand ils se retrouvent, lorsque Samuel semble avoir tout oublié, lorsque leurs corps se glissent l'un sur l'autre, et qu'ils ne font plus qu'un, comme dans ces jeux d'enfant où l'on rapproche son visage de l'autre pour regarder les yeux se fondre et ne faire plus qu'un? Lorsqu'ils s'endorment côte à côte, emportés par leurs rêves, mais sur

le même radeau, jusqu'à l'aube, jusqu'à la plage du réveil, et qu'elle peut regarder son corps, sentir le grain doux de sa peau en haut des cuisses, la chaleur de son épaule à l'attache du cou.

Pour effacer tout — à moins que ce ne soit pour se souvenir de tout, jusqu'à la douleur, jusqu'au nerf —, Ujine refait en sens inverse les chemins qu'elle a parcourus. Les halls des hôtels, des cinémas, les bars, l'église, les marches de la bibliothèque centrale, l'entrée du magasin Daimaru. Tous ces lieux que ses pas ont martelés, ces monuments que l'expectation avait rendus magiques, glorieux, magnifiques, brillants de néons, décorés de marbre ou d'acier, ou bien angoissants, sinistres, solitaires, arches de pont, quais de gare, bouches de métro, terrains vagues.

Que reste-t-il? Rien, pas même l'amertume. Cette amertume que recherche Samuel, qu'il donne en exemple. Les deux pôles de l'existence selon Samuel : l'ennui, l'amertume. Elle s'en souvient, au début, elle avait répondu : « C'est curieux, moi je ne m'ennuie jamais. » Samuel avait haussé les épaules. « Je ne suis pas en train de te parler d'ennui comme tu dirais je me fais chier. » Il avait montré le café, les miroirs tachés sur les murs, les gens attablés, sa tasse pleine de liquide noir. C'était un café souterrain, installé sous les escaliers du métro, un nom bizarre, inventé, La Crêpe Michèle. « Non, je te parle de ça, tu comprends. Tout ça. » Elle avait commencé à comprendre que c'était une angoisse, une insatisfaction, elle avait senti ce qui était incomplet et qui lui serrait le cœur, comme si jusqu'alors elle

n'avait jamais voulu le voir. Plus tard, dans son errance, dans sa folie, les mots de Samuel étaient revenus : « Tout ça. » L'amertume, le vide. Le goût de l'expresso. Les gens qui attendent, le vertige. Ce qui ne s'accomplira pas, ne s'accomplira jamais. Tout ça. Les leçons de vie.

Pour en sortir, la vindicte. C'est Rita, ou Micha, quelqu'un qui lui a apporté la solution. Un jour qu'elle se risquait à se raconter, à mots couverts, en parlant d'elle-même comme s'il s'agissait de quelqu'un d'autre : « Qu'est-ce que tu dirais de quelqu'un qui te demanderait de le joindre à un numéro de téléphone, et, quand tu veux appeler, le téléphone est occupé pendant une demi-heure et, quand enfin la communication passe, ça ne répond plus? » Et la réponse, évidente : « Je dirais que le type qui s'amuse à des choses comme ça est un malade mental, et je m'en irais le plus loin possible. » C'était donc ça. Tout bonnement, un malade, Ujine a été la proie d'un malade. Elle en est devenue un peu malade à son tour.

Pour guérir, Ujine a refait en sens inverse la dernière marche, cette nuit folle où elle a failli mourir. Ses pieds l'ont guidée jusqu'au train, vers l'aéroport. Le temps a passé, l'enfant commence à vraiment exister, il n'est plus seulement une idée. Il appuie sur l'estomac, sur la vessie. Dans les toilettes de la gare, Ujine a vomi dans le lavabo. Dans le miroir, derrière son image blafarde, une femme la regarde. « Excusez-moi. » Ujine a des larmes dans les yeux. La femme s'est approchée. « C'est votre premier? » Ujine a fait oui de la tête, elle sent une honte injustifiée. « Vous verrez, dans deux mois ça ira mieux,

vous aurez même la pêche. » Elle tend un mouchoir en papier. D'ordinaire, Ujine déteste la commisération. Pourtant ici, dans la solitude des toilettes de la gare, cela lui fait du bien. Elle murmure un : « Merci » mal assuré, et elle sort sur les quais balayés par le vent froid. Elle décide de ne pas aller jusqu'à l'aérogare. Maintenant, elle en est sûre, Samuel n'est jamais parti en voyage, peut-être même qu'elle a tout inventé. Elle traverse le parking, elle marche jusqu'à l'hôtel. C'est la fin de l'après-midi, l'équipe de nuit n'a pas encore pris son service. À la réception, une jeune femme la regarde avec méfiance. Avec son teint mâché, ses yeux cernés, son manteau informe (rien encore à dissimuler, mais l'envie de s'habiller large, d'enrober ses formes), Ujine ne ressemble plus du tout à une hôtesse de l'air, une de ces hôtesse que Samuel ramenait ici.

« Est-ce que je pourrais voir une chambre ? » En posant la question, elle n'y croit pas. La pimêche la regarde avec ironie. « Désolée, je n'ai pas le droit de faire visiter, d'ailleurs il n'y a pas de chambre disponible, vous pouvez toujours consulter notre site Internet. » Elle ment, Ujine a vu que seules trois ou quatre chambres ont leurs rideaux ouverts. Ujine revoit sa nuit sur le toit, c'est comme si tout cela était arrivé autrefois, à quelqu'un d'autre. Quelque chose tremble encore en elle, ce ne sont pas les genoux ni les chevilles. C'est dans la zone de mémoire qui se trouve en arrière de sa nuque, entre les omoplates. Elle sent la sueur qui mouille le creux de ses mains, elle s'essuie nerveusement sur son manteau. La jeune femme de la réception est carrément hostile main-

tenant, elle louche vers le téléphone sur son comptoir. « Est-ce que je peux faire autre chose ? » Ujine bat en retraite pas à pas. « Non, non, merci je — » Elle se dirige vers la sortie. Elle s'en va. Quand elle est au milieu du parking, elle se retourne et elle regarde le toit de l'immeuble, le rebord de béton gris contre le ciel. C'est trop haut pour les oiseaux, mais il lui semble voir une silhouette maigre, les bras écartés, assez semblable à une cigogne.

Plus moyen d'être seule, plus le temps d'être en paix. Ujine veut prendre sa revanche sur les actions perdues. Elle fait tout ce que le Jeu interdit. Elle téléphone à la banque, laisse pour Samuel des messages insensés, maintenant qu'elle a pu se procurer son numéro de portable elle envoie des rendez-vous par Texto, puis elle guette cachée dans une entrée d'immeuble, déguisée avec son manteau et des lunettes noires. Parfois il vient, il n'a pas l'air aussi triomphant, il regarde à gauche, à droite, il se retourne, il attend, il regarde son téléphone, justement Ujine vient de lui envoyer un message : « Tant pis, à un de ces jours peut-être. » C'était sa formule préférée ! Puisqu'on n'est sûr de rien, que demain n'existe pas.

Elle ne veut plus rester immobile. Elle s'est forcée à sortir, à être dehors, à rencontrer des gens. Ce sont ses pieds qui l'emmènent, elle n'a même pas besoin de réfléchir. Après les cours, la gym, pas la gym douce pour pré-mamans, mais du combat rythmique dans une salle cheap du centre-ville en compagnie de femmes fortes, sous la houlette d'une métisse très ronde et agile, Ujine a pensé que, dans ce cas, c'était de bon augure. Et une,

et deux, uppercut, direct du gauche, et une, et deux, swing du droit, crochet, le corps en avant, appui sur la jambe gauche, le pied bien à plat. Tous ces mouvements inutiles, un peu ridicules, mais qui font du bien à l'âme. À ses côtés, une femme plus très jeune, qui a dû être jolie, usée par les calmants, les somnifères, elle frappe dans le vide, swingue et jabbe. Ça n'est pas difficile d'imaginer qu'elle tape sur son homme, sur son traître.

Ujine a trouvé du travail dans une agence de location, le gérant s'appelle Christian Jonquet, il tutoie Ujine, et elle le tutoie aussi, il est quadra, gay, stressé, mais elle s'entend bien avec lui. Il l'envoie en mission, parce qu'elle présente bien, et ses études de droit l'ont impressionné : « Ujine, il y a cet appart à faire visiter, c'est loin, prends un taxi, il ne faut pas rater cette affaire. » Quand il s'énerve, elle dit : « Allez, calme-toi, ça va bien marcher. » Elle rapporte des contrats. Elle s'habille bien, elle se maquille, elle sait qu'avec un peu de fard à paupières et de rouge aux joues, ses cheveux noirs lissés à l'huile comme de la soie, elle peut convaincre n'importe qui. C'est une sorte de pari. Rapporter de l'argent, être capable, se surpasser, pas pour elle-même, ni pour la boîte, mais pour le fun, comme quand on court cent mètres ou qu'on saute par-dessus une corde, c'est une affaire de muscles. Et puis se sentir adulte enfin (à bientôt trente ans il est temps). Vivre la ville comme elle ne l'a jamais vécue, les interviews, les réunions, les restaurants chics, les conférences avec les banquiers. Rouler dans une auto confortable, avec un chauffeur, vitres teintées, clim, sièges en cuir, elle qui n'a connu que les taxis

minables avec les chauffeurs qui mettent des couches ! Une fois ou deux, elle a ressenti une petite émotion parce qu'elle a cru reconnaître la voiture de Samuel, sa berline gris foncé dont il est tellement fier, qui porte un nom un peu ridicule, Prima, Prélude, Protégé, quelque chose de ce genre. Une image furtive, un rappel de sa vie d'avant. Elle s'étire, elle a ôté ses escarpins dans l'auto pour écarter ses orteils, elle a calé ses reins sur les coussins, et elle regarde le paysage gris et blanc qui défile sur le côté, elle ne sent rien, ne pense à rien.

Mais tout doit finir, tôt ou tard. Le poids, les nausées, les vertiges. Christian a compris le premier. Les filles, Rita, les autres, personne n'a deviné, mais Christian a l'instinct, peut-être qu'il est plus attentif. Un jour il l'arrête dans sa course : « Ujine, je peux te parler ? » Il n'y va pas par quatre chemins : « Dis-moi la vérité, c'est pour quand ? » Il a un tic dans les yeux quand il est en colère. « Pourquoi tu m'as menti ? » Ujine fond en larmes, pas pour l'attendrir, mais parce que d'un coup la réalité la rejoint. Elle s'assoit sur une chaise, elle se sent lourde, lourde et bête, et ça la fait pleurer davantage. « Évidemment, je ne t'aurais pas engagée. » Christian reste perplexe, sa colère est tombée. Il s'assoit en face d'Ujine. « Et lui ? Qu'est-ce qu'il dit, lui ? » Ujine hausse les épaules, lui, eh bien il n'y a pas de lui. « Donc tu es seule avec ton problème. » Il ajoute : « Comment tu as fait ça, je te croyais intelligente ? » Il sort une boîte de mouchoirs en papier. Décidément, c'est la réponse universelle aux larmes des filles-mères. « Bon, eh bien, tu

travaillés encore un peu, le temps que je trouve quelqu'un pour te remplacer. Après tu te débrouilles, OK? » Pas de contrat, pas d'indemnités, rien à dire. En fin de compte avec une avance de trois mois, il n'était pas obligé, c'est lui, le gay, caractériel, exigeant qui aura été son seul soutien. Rita, quand Ujine a raconté, l'a engueulée : « Quoi, c'est tout? Pas la peine d'avoir étudié le droit, c'est toi qui lui fais un cadeau ! » Le jour du départ, Christian embrasse Ujine sur les deux joues. « Tiens-moi au courant quand même? » Et quand elle veut lui rendre sa boîte de cartes de visite au nom de l'agence, il refuse : « Garde-les, ça resservira peut-être l'année prochaine. »

La vie s'est ralentie en elle, autour d'elle. Ujine observe les changements, jour après jour. C'est un point chaud, au centre de son corps, et aussi dans la chambre, dans l'immeuble. Quelque chose en train de s'ouvrir, et en même temps qui l'enferme et la protège. Un silence.

Après la fièvre du boulot à l'agence, le mouvement s'est calmé, il n'y a plus d'expectative, plus de plan. Mais il n'y a pas rien. Il y a de la force, de la puissance. Pas de la sagesse, cela non, pas de la raison. Une pulsion de vie qui bat dans ses plis, qui bouge. Chez la gynéco, Ujine écoute pour la première fois les battements de cœur du fœtus, assourdis et impétueux, amplifiés par le haut-parleur. Un rythme différent du sien, plus rapide.

Quand elle sort dans la rue, malgré la neige qui encombre les trottoirs, elle entend le battement. Il recouvre tout, même les grondements des moteurs, même le vacarme des boggies du métro.

Le temps est long. Chaque seconde, chaque geste, naguère insignifiant, indifférent, aujourd'hui s'éternise. Ujine s'étonne de vivre chaque instant comme s'il ne devait jamais finir. Elle comprend qu'elle vit avec quelqu'un, non pas avec Samuel ou avec Christian, mais avec quelqu'un d'autre qui est son double en elle-même.

Un poids. Ça ne peut pas être le fœtus, à peine quelques grammes de chair, presque pas d'os. Mais son ventre s'arrondit, se remplit de liquide, ses seins se gonflent, elle aperçoit des veines là où la peau était lisse, les mamelons se sont durcis, ils sont hérissés de petites pointes. La nuit, elle étouffe, elle transpire, elle envoie promener la couette. Les orteils écartés comme à la plage, elle pose les mains sur son ventre pour sentir les ondes et les frissons. Elle est le centre de l'univers, tout vire autour d'elle. Par la fenêtre sans rideaux, elle regarde la nuit. L'astre avance lentement, il est un dieu à la beauté infinie, il la regarde en retour et elle reçoit l'onde de bienfait qui la recouvre. Elle sait qu'elle aura la force d'aller jusqu'au bout, de vivre son histoire. Elle sait qu'elle ne sera plus jamais seule. Plus rien d'autre n'a d'importance. Le téléphone portable peut vibrer sur la table de nuit, la petite fenêtre s'éclairer. Peut-être que c'est Samuel qui a retrouvé son numéro et qui appelle. Peut-être qu'il sait tout, qu'il a tout appris. Il a fait son enquête, et maintenant il voudrait bien savoir. Il croit qu'il a des droits. Ujine ne laisse pas de message d'accueil sur son répondeur, juste la voix de Kiri Te Kanawa qui chante *Bailero...* Cette voix qu'elle aime, qui parle pour elle. Comme si le temps avait cessé, ce qui était, ce

qui ne sera plus, la même chose, la même seconde infiniment longue.

Ujine a deux déconvenues.

La première, elle prend un taxi pour rouler au hasard, un luxe incroyable, déraisonnable. Elle se sent trop grosse pour marcher. Elle dit au chauffeur : « Vous roulez, je vous indiquerai le chemin. » Le bonhomme ne répond pas, il jette de temps à autre un coup d'œil suspicieux dans le rétroviseur. Il est comme sa bagnole, minable. Un vieux, les cheveux gris frisés, une moustache tombante jaunie par la nicotine. Il sent le Cologne et l'urine, il conduit probablement avec une couche-culotte pour ne pas avoir à s'arrêter. Justement, dans les collines, elle trouve un coin isolé, brumeux. « Arrêtez ici, s'il vous plaît. » C'est la rase campagne, pas une maison, pas une auto. « J'en ai pour un instant. » Il laisse tourner le moteur, il descend de voiture pour allumer une cigarette. Ujine frissonne dans le brouillard, les fines gouttes couvrent son visage, collent ses cheveux sur son front. Les grandes herbes sont immobiles, figées dans l'air, sans fleurs, de simples lances courbées. Les eulalies. C'est la première fois qu'elle revient depuis la fois avec Samuel, quand la vie s'est enracinée dans son ventre. C'est bien une mémoire du futur, fragile et tenace comme les grandes herbes humbles. Ujine revient vers l'auto, elle dit au chauffeur : « Vous avez vu comme c'est beau ? » Mais lui tête son mégot mouillé, il lâche : « Ces foutues mauvaises herbes, ça nous vient sûrement de Chine ! » Elle pourrait en rire, ou en pleurer.

L'autre problème est venu de Rita. Quand elle a su qu'Ujine était enceinte, toute seule, sans secours, elle a commencé à venir plus souvent, elle apportait des fruits, elle faisait des démarches pour la clinique, elle invitait des gens de sa communauté, une église où elle chante chaque samedi après-midi, et Ujine l'a même accompagnée. C'est dans un quartier cossu, loin de la pollution et des trafics. « Tu verras, ma chérie, tu seras bien, nous allons bien nous occuper de toi. » Ujine s'est inquiétée pour l'argent, ses économies ont fondu. « Ne parlons pas de ça, nous sommes des amies, non? Je leur ai dit qu'on se connaît depuis toujours. » C'est bon d'avoir une amie, de ne pas être seule pour l'accouchement. À la clinique de Rita, ils ont été gentils. M. Gynéco est un petit homme rond et souriant avec une poigne rassurante. Rita est venue avec Ujine pour toutes les visites. Elle reste dans la salle d'attente en feuilletant des magazines, et quand Ujine sort, elle l'embrasse : « Ça a été? Pas d'inquiétude? On va vivre ça ensemble jusqu'au bout toutes les deux. » Seulement voilà, un jour, c'est tout proche de la date prévue, elle apporte à la clinique un dossier. « Tu dois signer là, et là. — C'est quoi, ces papiers? » Rita passe son bras autour d'Ujine. « C'est pour le bébé, tu comprends? Pour qu'il ait un avenir. » Ujine ne comprend pas, elle lit les formulaires. C'est un acte d'abandon, et quand elle le lit, ses yeux se remplissent de larmes. « Mais je veux garder le bébé, pourquoi tu me donnes ces papiers? » Rita se veut compréhensive : « Je t'assure, ma chérie, c'est la meilleure solution, comment veux-tu faire autrement? J'ai déjà trouvé une

famille pour lui, des gens bien, tu les as vus à l'église, ils ont une belle maison, ils paieront tous les frais, c'est prévu, le bébé aura un vrai papa, une vraie maman. » Ujine est tellement désespérée qu'elle signe l'acte, elle écrit son nom dans la case.

Puis elle se reprend. Rita avec ses airs, ses cantiques, ses principes. La vie, défendre la vie. Voler les enfants. Elle est venue avec un bouquet, une gerbe de forsythias en fleur qu'elle a coupés dans le jardin de la clinique. « Tes papiers, tu peux les déchirer, et tes fleurs, tu peux les reprendre ! Jamais je ne donnerai mon bébé, tu entends ? Et tu peux le dire aussi à toute la clinique, à tous ces gens, avec leur belle maison ! » Elle ne crie pas, mais elle a une telle rage dans la voix que Rita s'en va avec ses fleurs jaunes, elle file comme un rat, si vite et si loin qu'Ujine n'entendra plus parler d'elle !

Quelque chose est en marche, ne s'arrêtera pas. C'est une motion qui vient de loin, en fait elle a commencé avec l'univers, c'est lent et long et profond, c'est animal, mais c'est aussi la volonté de l'autre, un autre inconnu (certainement pas Samuel, lui n'a été que l'agent du hasard), un désir.

Chaque jour rapproche Ujine de la naissance. Elle l'espère et la craint. La nuit, il lui arrive de rêver qu'elle est légère. Elle est redevenue une enfant, elle court aussi vite qu'elle peut sur une plage de sable dur, le long des vagues. Sa mère est assise dans les dunes, à l'abri du vent. Le mal qui va la tuer n'est pas encore déclaré, mais la douleur est déjà là, quelque part dans le ventre, pour

l'annoncer. De temps en temps elle grimace, Ujine la regarde : « Tu as mal, maman ? — Ce n'est rien, juste un point de côté, ça va passer. » Quand Ujine se réveille, elle a quelques secondes de perplexité : tout ça est un rêve ? Ses mains cherchent son ventre, elle sent le fœtus qui bouge, la forme de son pied sur la paroi.

« Respirez, soufflez. Respirez, soufflez. » Dans la salle de l'hôpital — c'est moins chic qu'à la clinique, mais c'est gratuit — les femmes font leur entraînement. Ujine pense qu'il y a trois mois elle aurait ri : toutes ces bonnes femmes couchées sur le dos avec leurs gros ventres, et qui respirent, soufflent. Des otaries au bord de la banquise. Est-ce qu'on va accoucher par la bouche ?

Elle a eu Samuel au téléphone, au vol. Elle voyait que c'était lui, donc elle ne décrochait pas. Et puis là, si, elle décroche, pourquoi se cacher ? C'est un inconnu maintenant. Elle a oublié qu'il a la voix si grave, toujours hésitante, elle se souvient qu'elle a aimé sa voix avant tout le reste. Pour le plaisir d'entendre sa voix, de rester lointaine, évasive. « Qu'est-ce que tu fais en ce moment ? » Ujine, littéralement : « Eh bien, je suis entre deux, heu, occupations. » Samuel parle de son boulot à la banque, d'un voyage bientôt, une mutation, en Afrique, ou peut-être en Corée. « Et si on se voyait ? » Ujine a un bref instant de panique. Pas question qu'il voie ce gros ventre, elle n'a pas envie de s'expliquer. « Écoute, Samy, je suis un peu occupée moi aussi, je dois partir. » Un silence. « Et tu vas où ? » Elle a envie de répondre : sur la lune, ou bien : au pays des eulalies. Mais elle ne dit rien, juste

je t'en reparlerai un jour, elle sent qu'elle pique sa curiosité. Peut-être même qu'il est jaloux et elle en éprouve un sentiment de triomphe un peu ridicule qui lui donne envie de rire. Cette certitude de ne pas céder est imbécile, elle en a honte, mais elle reconnaît que ça fait du bien. Elle raccroche. Elle ne répondra plus au téléphone. Peut-être qu'elle est déjà une maman et qu'elle ne doit penser à rien d'autre qu'à protéger son enfant, puisque les lapins mâles mangent leur progéniture, c'est connu.

Ujine vit au jour le jour. Elle mange beaucoup, pour nourrir le bébé. Elle ne regarde plus son poids sur la bascule. À la salle d'entraînement, chaque femme a son histoire. Il y a les énormes, passives, dolentes, accompagnées par les géniteurs, il y a celles comme Ujine qui ont un petit ventre rond, presque pointu, celles qui nagent dans des marinières, celles en survêtement comme si elles allaient à la compétition, un match de volley-ball sans doute? Ujine parle avec Nelly sa voisine de salle. Elle est caissière dans un supermarché, quand elle sort d'ici elle va au boulot. Est-ce qu'on lui donne au moins une chaise confortable? Et le *niño*, est-ce que ça lui plaît le travail? Nelly rit, elle a des dents gâtées, mais son sourire éclaire son visage couleur de bronze. « C'est marquant, chaque fois que le tiroir-caisse sonne, il fait un geste dans mon ventre comme s'il voulait attraper des pièces! — Alors, ça sera un banquier! » Nelly rit.

Ujine se souvient, huit mois avant, quand le fœtus était encore grand comme une crevette et qu'elle allait au rendez-vous avec Samuel devant la banque, elle pensait à ceci : Samuel dans le ventre de sa maman, dormant

en suçant son pouce, ses pieds déjà si grands qu'il ne savait pas où les fourrer ! Est-ce qu'un homme pense à de telles choses ? Il faudrait alors qu'il ne soit plus un homme, qu'il cesse de donner pour recevoir. Un jour, Samuel théorisait, comme d'habitude, les hommes ceci, les femmes cela, et Ujine avait dit : « La seule différence, c'est que les hommes donnent (leur sperme) et les femmes le reçoivent. » Tout ce qu'ils ne se sont pas dit, tout ce qui est resté lettre morte. Tout ce qu'elle a retenu en elle, et maintenant, voilà, c'est devenu un enfant ! Une vie dans la vie, un étranger dans soi.

La douleur depuis des jours. Les contractions de l'utérus, la leçon de la sage-femme se déroule comme prévu : la pièce de dix centimes, de vingt, de cinquante. Une ondulation. Le ventre énorme, dilaté, c'est ce qu'elle imagine dans la salle de travail, un ventre à la taille du globe terrestre ! C'est moi, pense Ujine, c'est en train de m'arriver, je ne peux pas être quelqu'un d'autre, je ne peux pas être ailleurs. Les hommes peuvent toujours être ailleurs. Même quand ils sont couards à la guerre, il n'y a pas un instant qu'ils ne choisissent pas. « Plutôt libre que roi. » C'est la devise de Samuel. Croit-elle. Elle n'en est plus si sûre.

C'est là, ça arrive. Le gynéco de l'hôpital en a décidé ainsi. Il a consulté son carnet de rendez-vous (pas son almanach), et d'une seule piqure il déclenche l'événement. Ce n'est pas à lui qu'on fera croire que c'est unique, merveilleux, miraculeux. Tous les jours, à chaque

heure, cela se passe : à 9 heures, Mme Nadeau. À 10 h 30, Mme Sauvaigo. À 11 h 30 Mme Janicot. À 12 h 30 madame, heu, mademoiselle... Surtout pas la nuit, pas le samedi, jour de sortie avec son fils (il est divorcé à ses torts), ni le dimanche, parce qu'il pratique l'aviron sur le plan d'eau du parc. Mais ça ne marche pas toujours. Quelquefois il faut se dépêcher, ça ne se passe pas bien, la quinze-heures-trente nécessite une intervention, les fers, la ventouse, une césarienne.

Ujine délire. C'est sans doute l'effet de la péridurale. Elle n'en voulait pas, elle a horreur des piqûres, elle s'est laissé convaincre. Les pieds dans les étriers. Respirez, soufflez, respirez, soufflez... Dix centimes, cinq centimes, vingt, cinquante centimes, est-ce qu'il existe une plus grosse pièce ? Ujine n'est pas là, elle n'est plus là. Le travail est ailleurs. Elle a été remplacée par quelqu'un d'autre. Une grosse femme écrasée sur le dos, les jambes arc-boutées, les pieds agrippés aux étriers, poussant, poussant des pieds comme pour se jeter en arrière, pour s'extraire, pour remonter à la surface. Respirez, soufflez... Est-ce qu'elle doit éventuellement porter le poids du monde comme le géant Atlas ? Des visages sont devant elle, penchés sur elle, la sage-femme, les infirmières, le gynéco n'a pas encore daigné venir. C'est un voyageur comme Samuel, un représentant de commerce, avec son visage poupin et ses poils sur les oreilles, son gros nez et ses sourcils hirsutes. Pourvu qu'il ne vienne pas. S'il vient, elle sait ce qu'elle dira, Non, monsieur, je n'ai besoin de rien, j'ai chez moi tout ce qu'il me faut, aspirateur, fer à repasser, frigo, congélateur. Pour le linge je vais

à la laverie, les machines se détraquent tout le temps. « Comment ça se présente ? » Bien, bien merci, et pour vous ? Une grimace. Où est le Seigneur lune ? C'est lui que je voudrais voir, son beau visage, son sourire de la nuit. Non, pas ce projecteur à iode qui inonde la scène d'une lumière atroce. Sinon le Seigneur soleil, je vous prie, dans une clairière, dans la douce atmosphère de l'été, sur le champ des éteules. C'est qu'il manque un témoin, autrement dit le père de l'enfant. « Est-ce que quelqu'un assistera à la naissance ? » Non, sans commentaires. Mais cela a fait le tour du personnel de l'hôpital, répété, noté, souligné. « Pauvre petite, toute seule, il n'y aura personne avec elle, personne pour la visiter. » Les faces sont penchées, attentives, pareilles à de bonnes fées. Ujine serre la main de la sage-femme à sa gauche, une très jeune, un visage d'enfant, rose avec des frisons blonds qui s'échappent de son bonnet. Elle sent une onde de gratitude, elle aimerait connaître son nom, son âge. Depuis combien de temps elle est apprentie sage-femme. Est-ce qu'elle a un petit ami, est-ce qu'elle va se marier bientôt ? Respirez, soufflez... Entre deux respirations elle n'a pas le temps de poser les questions. Elle est si fatiguée maintenant, c'est la fin de la journée, le soleil se cache derrière des nuages, la lune est éteinte, il n'y a que cette lumière aveuglante. Je voudrais tant que bébé naisse dans une eau bleue, dans une clairière, dans un champ d'éteules. Quand le Seigneur lune apparaît dans le ciel, de l'autre côté du mur, elle entend distinctement son chant, un murmure doux d'eau et d'herbe folle. La fille d'Ujine naît, et Ujine s'est endormie.

## Épilogue

L'été, à nouveau. Les nuages glissent au-dessus des dunes, le vent fait bouger les chardons dans le sable, juste un frémissement de poils sur la peau. Ujine est couchée à l'abri de la dune, en chien de fusil. Elle sent le vent sur sa peau, le sable glisser entre ses orteils. Au creux de son ventre, Eulalie s'est endormie. Elle dort à l'envers, la tête vers le bas, comme si elle se souvenait de sa naissance. Entre les seins d'Ujine, ses petits pieds sont offerts, abandonnés. Alors Ujine compte ses orteils, sans se lasser. Pour faire rire Eulalie, elle lui chantonne parfois la comptine que sa mère lui disait, *this little piggy*, ce petit cochon est allé au marché, ce petit cochon est resté à la maison, et au dernier petit doigt, wi-wi-wi-wi-wi, tout le long du chemin ! Un deux trois quatre cinq, dix en tout, minuscules et roses, avec des ongles couleur de nacre. Eulalie, c'est le prénom qu'Ujine a choisi, en souvenir des grandes tiges et des pompons floconneux qui se mêlaient au brouillard, sur la route de l'aéroport. Samuel n'a pas dit non, il n'a pas demandé pourquoi. Il est revenu des voyages, il n'ira plus au bout du monde.