

Volume 1: Imaginative Promptings: on ‘translating’

Paul et Virginie

Volume 2: *Genie and Paul*: A Novel

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September 2010

Abstract

This thesis comprises a novel, *Genie and Paul*, and a critical commentary which posits *Genie and Paul* as a ‘translation’ of J. J. H. Bernadin de Saint-Pierre’s, *Paul et Virginie*, an eighteenth-century French novel set in colonial Mauritius. *Genie and Paul* explores its British Mauritian protagonists’ complex sense of cultural identity, with reference to *Paul et Virginie*, a novel of great personal significance to me. In my critical commentary, I explore the ways in which my novel creatively engages with *Paul et Virginie*, and make a case for using the term ‘translation’ to define my rewriting of it, with reference to the growing body of postcolonial literary translation theory. I examine the significance of *Paul et Virginie* to the development of my identity as a writer, and argue that my ‘translation’ is an effective method of negotiating my complex relationship both to Mauritius, and to the European literary canon. I contextualise this discussion by looking at writers who share a similarly equivocal relationship with their cultural background, chiefly V.S. Naipaul and Pankaj Mishra. I consider how these writers’ backgrounds inflect their respective relationships with literary tradition, and examine the strategies they have employed to negotiate this. Whereas Naipaul has been initially reluctant to admit to literary influences, Mishra overtly acknowledges his in *The Romantics*, his autobiographical first novel. I show how this novel is a ‘translation’ of a key text in Mishra’s personal canon, Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education*, and I use this discussion as a model for the analysis of my own ‘translation’ of *Paul et Virginie*.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the generous support of my first reader, Luke Williams.

I also wish to offer my thanks to Andrew Cowan and John Thieme, my supervisors, and to my good friends, Richard Misek and Caroline Woodley.

Thanks are also due to my family.

Volume 1: Imaginative Promptings: on ‘translating’ *Paul et Virginie*

Introduction

‘Prologue to an Autobiography’ is what its title says. It is not an autobiography, a story of a life or deeds done. It is an account of something less easily seized: my literary beginnings and the imaginative promptings of my many-sided background.¹

This critical commentary is an examination of the relationship between my novel, *Genie and Paul*, and the eighteenth-century French pastoral romance, *Paul et Virginie*² by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. *Genie and Paul* is a rewriting, or, as I will show, a kind of translation, of this text. In this commentary I will explore how the ‘imaginative promptings’ of my own ‘many-sided background’ informed the writing of my novel. I will present this discussion in the context of a broader consideration of the writerly impulse as a combined series of ‘imaginative promptings’ emanating from the proto-writer’s sense of cultural complexity, or even confusion.

When I set out to write an account of the relationship between my own novel and *Paul et Virginie*, I soon realised it was an exercise in post-rationalisation: it is only since completing *Genie and Paul* that I have been able to consider the critical issues involved in its writing – my reasons for writing it, the decisions I made during the writing process, and the techniques I employed to realise it.

This post-rationalisation involved ever deeper levels of regression: in considering the relationship which exists between *Genie and Paul* and *Paul et Virginie*, I was obliged to consider my personal relationship with the original text, and in so doing acknowledge the role it had played in my development as a writer: representing, perhaps, one aspect of the ‘many-sided background’ which has led me to become a writer. Or perhaps, since I have used this text as the basis of my first novel, arguably an ‘imaginative prompting’ itself.

1 Naipaul, V.S., ‘Prologue to an Autobiography’, in *Literary Occasions: Essays*, (London: Picador, 2003), p. 55

2 St. Pierre, Jean-Jacques Bernadin Henri de, *Paul et Virginie*, (Paris: Louis Janet, 1924)

At this point, I stopped looking back. I started reading essays by writers examining their experiences of becoming writers, and of writing their first novels. That I should gravitate towards self-reflexive writers is no surprise, given my undertaking here. Three of these writers in particular seemed to articulate, in different ways, experiences and approaches with which I could closely identify: V.S. Naipaul, Hanif Kureishi and Pankaj Mishra, writers whose fiction I was already familiar with, and whose sensibilities appealed to me.

It was at this point I realised my exercise in post-rationalisation, originally intended to explore the links between my first novel and a book I read as a teenager, *Paul et Virginie*, was in fact leading me to consider links between more fundamental concepts relating to my writing practice: concepts found in the work of these writers, who collectively had triggered in me a realisation regarding these ‘links’. These concepts could be characterised as literary tradition, cultural identity, literary influence and the notion of the writerly vocation. This commentary, then, is a setting out and an examining of these concepts, and a tracing of the relationship between them; a kind of literary or intellectual genealogy of *Genie and Paul* and its ‘many-sided background’.

In Chapter One I will examine briefly what the above writers share in terms of approach and ideology and the extent to which I identify with these. To be a writer of literary fiction is to have a sense of literary tradition – the notion that one’s practice is part of a continuing conversation with existing work. I will argue that these writers share to some degree a problematised sense of literary tradition and will consider the extent to which this is attributable to their respective cultural identities. I shall also explore the extent to which this tension between literary tradition and cultural identity has impacted on their work, before discussing my own position in this regard.

I will look at the role that formative reading experiences have played in the development of these writers’ sense of literary tradition (it perhaps worth nothing that all three writers discuss their formative reading experiences), and in my own, and will examine the related concept of the writer’s personal canon: the selection of books which a writer acknowledges as an influence – direct or otherwise – on their work. I will establish the extent to which writers whose practice has been informed by a problematised sense of literary tradition might arguably form a tradition of their own, and the extent to which I might situate my own practice within this tradition.

The concepts outlined in Chapter One – literary tradition, cultural identity,

formative reading experiences and the personal canon – form a tributary of themes which feed into the central theme of Pankaj Mishra’s *The Romantics*³: reading as an act of cultural translation, or, as I will later show, an act of *cannibalistic* translation. In Chapter Two, I will offer a close examination of this theme as it plays out in Mishra’s novel, with reference to the actual act of ‘cannibalistic translation’ which I believe the text itself effects: *The Romantics* heavily references Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education*⁴. I will argue, with reference to Mishra’s essay, ‘Benares: Learning to Read’, that Mishra’s appropriation of Flaubert’s novel itself constitutes an act of cannibalistic translation. In defining the parameters of the relationship between the two texts, I will establish a critical framework for discussing in detail the relationship between my own novel and *Paul et Virginie*, which will comprise Chapter Three.

3 Mishra, Pankaj, *The Romantics*, (London: Picador, 1999)

4 Flaubert, Gustave, *A Sentimental Education*, trans. Douglass Parmée, (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1989)

Chapter One

1. Looking for a Model

There is a type of literary writer who is characterised by a certain self-consciousness, a pronounced sense of vocation, a preoccupation with what it means to be a writer⁵. Such writers may be identified by their habit of writing almost compulsively – in the sense that the confessional often gives off the whiff of compulsion – about their own practice. It is to such writers that I turned when I began to think about writing this critical commentary. In reading such ‘confessional’ essays, I was looking for insight into the types of relationship a writer might have with the raw material of their first fictions. The material which forms the basis of a writer’s first work of fiction is often deeply personal, often entwined with the impulse to become a writer in the first place and, for that reason, often the subject of such essays. In undertaking this research, I thought I was looking for models. It wasn’t until I found my models that I realised I had in fact been looking for a literary tradition.

The essays I refer to as ‘models’ are chiefly V.S. Naipaul’s ‘Prologue to an Autobiography’ and ‘Jasmine’⁶, Pankaj Mishra’s ‘Benares: Learning to Read’⁷, and, to a lesser extent, Hanif Kureishi’s ‘Reflections on Writing’ and *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father*.⁸ These essays have served as useful references, each of them relating the circumstances in which the writer came to produce their first full-length work of fiction, while examining the writer’s relationship to this ‘deeply personal’ material. I choose to regard these essays collectively less in terms of exemplars, and more as constitutive of a proto-literary tradition of which I feel part; this tradition is predicated, as I will show, on these writers’ problematised relationship to literary tradition itself. I believe that this proto-literary tradition hinges on the writer’s unstable or complex cultural identity. Why this should be of significance to me is apparent from the story of my relationship with *Paul et Virginie*.

5 A distinction should be made between the self-conscious writer and the writer whose work is self-conscious, that is, overtly preoccupied with the process of fiction itself: writers of metafiction such as Italo Calvino, or Paul Auster. I am exclusively concerned here with the former type of writer.

6 Both in Naipaul, *Literary Occasions* op.cit.

7 Mishra, Pankaj, ‘Benares: Learning to Read’, in *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond*, (London: Picador, 2007)

8 Kureishi, Hanif, ‘Reflections on Writing’, in *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics*, (London: Faber, 2002), and *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father*, (London: Faber, 2004)

2. *A Translated Being*

In his essay, 'Prologue to an Autobiography', V.S. Naipaul identifies his impulse to write as coming from a need to illuminate the 'areas of darkness' which exist within his family history, his perceptions of 'home' or India, and his sense of cultural dislocation. Naipaul's 'many-sided background' resulted in his growing up as the English-speaking child of second-generation Indian immigrants in Trinidad, which, like India at the time, was part of the British Empire.

I can identify with Naipaul's sense of cultural confusion. I was born in London to Mauritian parents. Mauritius, like Trinidad, was, until the Sixties, a British-owned sugar-colony whose population comprised descendants of African slaves (known as 'Creoles'), as well as indentured labourers from India, Chinese immigrants and European colonials. Most Mauritians identify with one of these groups but my father is Indian/Chinese, my mother, Portuguese-Creole/French-Indian; both grew up with a fairly mutable sense of cultural identity. Once they had left Mauritius, however, the particular facts of their respective ethnic origins became superseded by their status as the more culturally homogenous, 'Mauritian'. But what did it mean to be of Mauritian parentage? London might have provided a default cultural identity as it had done for other first-generation Britons in similar situations (I was born there and most of my UK-based family still live there), had my father not joined the RAF, a career which necessitated our moving house, school and, in a couple of instances, countries, once every two or three years; I felt doubly displaced. My father, on the other hand, felt the opposite: having grown up in a colony in the British Empire, where people of French and British origin enjoyed a higher social status than mixed or Creole Mauritians, the hierarchical social structure and heightened sense of 'Britishness' that characterised the culture of the RAF seemed utterly familiar to him. But such a rigidly defined cultural environment made me question all the more where it was that my family and I were really from.

These particular circumstances gave me a great desire to connect with Mauritius in any way I could. I had an urge to see Mauritius in print: one way of rooting oneself in the world is through literature, so as a keen reader, it was natural that I should want to see my parents' island of origin depicted in the books I read; because my parents could not afford to take us there, reading was one way in which I could 'visit' Mauritius (this was before the internet). Seeing something in print was,

for me, affirmation of the highest order. But the few Mauritian novels, poems and plays which formed the island's tradition at the time were not available to me in England. In fact, they were inaccessible to many people in Mauritius, due to cost or because they were out of print. And although a Mauritian literary tradition exists, it is originally a Francophone one which was not, until recently, widely recognised outside Mauritius. So when, at the age of ten, I read Farrukh Dhondy's collection of short stories, *Come to Mecca*, I experienced something of an epiphany regarding the idea of fiction and invisibility: these stories showed me that there were many ways to be black and that people who were collectively dismissed as black or 'Pakis' actually had rich cultural histories which lay beyond the mere fact of skin colour. But the epiphany was two-fold: if there were many stories about the many ways to be black, where was my story? Specifically, that about my experience, and those of my sister and cousins, as first-generation British-Mauritians? And at the same time the question was raised, it was answered by a fact I had long since become aware of, after having been asked countless times, as a child, where it was that I and my parents were from: most people I encountered had never even heard of Mauritius, and this despite its status as a former British colony. The simple truth was this: for most of the British people I met, most of the adults I met, Mauritius, my supposed country of origin, and one which they had, effectively owned, did not even exist. Perhaps it did not really exist at all.

In this context, Naipaul's thoughts on dislocation, areas of darkness and his 'fantasies of home' begin to have real significance for me. I can understand the curiosity, the sense of fantasy and the need to fill in the gaps which this cultural dislocation bred in him: this notion of himself as being out of reach of the cultural markers of language, customs and literature which generally root one; this need to work back, to explore one's origins, from my own experience of being at several paces removed from the closest thing I have to a place of origin. This should explain the significance, then, of J. J. H. Bernadin de Saint-Pierre's novel, *Paul et Virginie* in my personal canon: it was my first encounter with a fictional Mauritius. It is a key text in the Mauritian canon also. I did not read the novel until my late teens, although I was aware of the story (the basic plot of which had often been recounted to us in fairy-tale form as children). Suffice it to say that when I came to write my first novel and wanted to engage with my British-Mauritian identity, I spent a lot of time thinking about *Paul et Virginie*. When I came to use the text as the foundation for my own novel, I was surprised at the level of antagonism it provoked in me – the level

and the quality of this antagonism, which felt creative, rather than destructive: it seemed to be a cognate of the original impulse to write which had led me to look at *Paul et Virginie* more closely in the first place. I have found that, for the purposes of understanding more about my practice, there is a story to be told about uncertain cultural identity and an uneasy relationship with literary tradition; about literary transgression and the writerly impulse. V.S. Naipaul's essays, 'Prologue to an Autobiography' and 'Jasmine' illustrate this story, which is also the story of how I came to translate *Paul et Virginie*.

3. *An Act of Faith*

The cartoon character Wylie Coyote is often led into dangerous situations in pursuit of his quarry, Roadrunner. One common scenario involves Wylie running some way off a cliff after Roadrunner, before looking down to realise he's running in mid-air. At which point we witness a static moment of horrified realisation – outrage, even – before the inevitable happens and Wylie plummets to the ground.

This business of being fine until you look down is a great metaphor for faith, and one that comes to me often when I consider the act of faith needed to begin writing: to create a new work or to set out in pursuit of a writerly vocation. An even greater act of faith, I believe, is needed if you set out without the sense of a literary tradition (one handed down or sought out) to follow or support you, or one against which to define yourself: by tradition, I mean a body of work perceived by a writer as one which somehow legitimises their own practice, one with which their own work might enter into a dialogue. I would characterise myself as such a writer, evident in the precocious sense of outrage I felt as a young reader when I encountered *Come to Mecca*, feeling that it pointed up how my sisters and I were overlooked by the prevailing literary culture.

The epitome of such writers – writers who feel themselves deracinated and who began their careers without a literary tradition – is V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul attributes his difficult relationship with literary tradition to a colonial British education in a country with no formal literary tradition of its own, exploring this position in essays on his formative reading and writing experiences. In 'Jasmine', for example, he writes of his schoolboy encounters with texts from a syllabus set by the British colonial education system, most notably the Wordsworth poem, 'Daffodils'. He points up the absurdity of studying a poem in praise of a flower neither he nor his

fellow pupils had ever seen. Although in the recounting of this anecdote he imparts a subtle scorn for the colonial authorities, the real – that is to say, original – butt of this joke is young Naipaul and his fellow classmates: Naipaul ascribes to them a kind of cringing colonial shame. There is the shame too of Naipaul the aspiring writer, the helplessness he feels in the face of his own fundamental ignorance: if he lacks familiarity with even the commonplace in English literary tradition – for that is the character of Wordsworth’s daffodils, both the flower, and the poem – what hope has he of engaging with what is significant in that literary tradition? What hope has he of ever writing anything of significance since his world – and by extension, he himself – is not acknowledged by the only literary tradition he knows?

Such encounters, Naipaul argues, provoked not only shame in terms of exclusion from the culture of the metropole, but also a shame that stemmed from knowing there was no equivalent local literary tradition to which he might turn: ‘To us, without a mythology, all literatures were foreign. Trinidad was small, remote and unimportant, and we knew we could not hope to read in books of the life we saw about us.’⁹ Such a lack was felt particularly keenly by those who had literary ambitions, or so Naipaul attests. The featureless landscape of a colony with no prevailing literary culture provided no landmarks by which the aspiring writer might orient himself. Naipaul writes in the Foreword to his father’s novel, *The Adventures of Gurudeva*¹⁰:

Writers need a source of strength other than that which they find in their talent. Literary talent doesn’t exist by itself; it feeds on a society and depends for its development on the nature of that society. What is true of my father is true of other writers of the region. The writer begins with his talent, finds confidence in his talent, but then discovers that it isn’t enough, that, in a society as deformed as ours, by the exercise of his talent he has set himself adrift.¹¹

To begin as a writer without the benefit of a tradition is a risky, lonely business, then, according to Naipaul. He speaks longingly of the ‘The English or French writer of my age’ who ‘had grown up in a world that was more or less explained’. Such writers

9 Naipaul, V.S., ‘Jasmine’, in *Literary Occasions*, op.cit. p. 45-46

10 Naipaul, Seepersad, *The Adventures of Gurudeva*, (London: HarperCollins, 1976)

11 ‘Foreword to *The Adventures of Gurudeva*’, reprinted in Naipaul, *Literary Occasions*, op.cit. p. 127

‘wrote against a background of knowledge. I couldn’t be a writer in the same way, because to be a colonial, as I was, was to be spared knowledge. It was to live in an intellectually restricted world; it was to accept those restrictions.’¹²

4. Naipaul’s search for a tradition

In defining his island’s culture as ‘intellectually restricted’, Naipaul does so in relation to the metropole, thereby enforcing the cultural hegemony which he blames for initially inhibiting his ambition. As a young writer, however, Naipaul went on to discover that, ‘the restrictions could become attractive’, when he found the confidence to represent in his first work of prose fiction, *Miguel Street* (1959)¹³, ‘the intellectually restricted world’ of a street in the Port of Spain area he had lived on as a child. Having defined these original restrictions in terms of the literary tradition of the metropole, to then find them ‘attractive’ might be regarded as an act of subversion against this same metropolitan literary tradition. Particularly if we impute to the word ‘attractive’ here, Naipaul’s characteristic ironic understatement. In fact, in *Miguel Street*, Naipaul goes beyond finding these restrictions ‘attractive’ and actively celebrates them. This is evident in Naipaul’s overt referencing of Calypso, and his use of it as a device for illustrating the stories’ themes of machismo, sexual and romantic failure, and frustrated colonial ambition, themselves popular themes in Calypso. Naipaul’s use of Calypso here could be construed as subversive because this form exists as the antithesis to the culture of the metropole, being a popular, indigenous and oral form of culture whose typical subject-matter is far removed from the concerns of the great writers Naipaul encountered in school. In his 1987 study of Naipaul’s use of allusion in his early fiction, *The Web of Tradition*¹⁴, John Thieme gives a detailed account of Naipaul’s use of popular Calypso from the 1930s and 40s in *Miguel Street*. Thieme cites Naipaul’s comment in *The Middle Passage* (1962) on the significance of Calypso to Trinidadians:

It is only in the calypso that the Trinidadian touches reality. The calypso is a purely local form. No song composed outside Trinidad is a calypso. The calypso

12 Naipaul, ‘Prologue to an Autobiography’, op.cit. p. 66

13 Naipaul, V.S., *Miguel Street*, (London: Heinemann, 1974)

14 Thieme, John, *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul’s Fiction* (London: Hansib Publications, 1987)

deals with local incidents, local attitudes, and it does so in a local language. The pure calypso, the best calypso, is incomprehensible to the outsider.¹⁵

This use of the word ‘outsider’ is interesting, and echoes the exclusivity which for Naipaul characterises the English literary tradition, a tradition which he feels has made an outsider of him. I believe Naipaul’s use of Calypso is an attempt – conscious or otherwise - to establish a tradition of his own: if not to make an ‘outsider’ of the non-Trinidadian who reads *Miguel Street*, then to at least claim a cultural heritage of his own and to use it as a basis for his own work. The function of these stories as a means of establishing his own literary tradition and as a way of working through an antagonism towards a tradition he feels has excluded him, is evident in the many instances where Naipaul’s characters themselves encounter ‘litratcher and poultry’¹⁶. If a writer positions himself as an outsider to an established literary tradition, direct engagement with it can often carry the sense of a transgression. In writing overtly about a society which exists so squarely outside the reaches of metropolitan culture, the encounters between these two worlds depicted in *Miguel Street* are inevitably charged with irony¹⁷: when writing about an itinerant poet, for example, it is no coincidence that Naipaul gives him the same name as the author of the dreaded ‘Daffodils’. As Thieme says, of the cultural divide between the English literary tradition and Calypso: ‘It is most clearly reflected in the story “B. Wordsworth” in which the protagonist sees himself as a spiritual brother of his English namesake.’¹⁸ Furthermore, Naipaul invites a comparison of the respective values of Trinidadian and English literary cultures, through his references to Calypso and poetry:

He attempts to sell his poems, a practice in which, the narrator tells him, only calypsonians engage, and it transpires that he is in fact a part-time calypsonian during the season. Like the vast majority of the two to three hundred aspirants who annually compete for the title of Calypso Monarch, he finds it impossible to make a living from singing calypsos during the rest of the year and so

15 Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 15

16 Naipaul, *Miguel Street* op.cit., p.34

17 Cf. Hardy’s Jude Fawley, the ill-fated stone-mason desperate to be accepted by that bastion of educational establishment who is engaged in the repair of Oxford University’s college walls.

18 Thieme, John, op.cit., p. 58

dispenses with this role and dons that of Romantic poet.¹⁹

Thieme argues that Naipaul's implication here is that both the roles of poet and calypsonian are 'variants on the same idea; both fail to bring him any real self-fulfillment.'²⁰ What is of interest here is B. Wordsworth's privileging of the status of Poet over Calypsonian, and his appropriation of a foreign literary tradition, moreover, the sense of entitlement he displays in doing so. And his motives are pure. He is not seeking to access cultural prestige in adopting the name of a more famous poet. When explaining what the 'B' of his first initial stands for, Wordsworth says: 'Black. Black Wordsworth. White Wordsworth was my brother. We share one heart. I can watch a small flower like the morning glory and cry.'²¹ B. Wordsworth's sense of entitlement is encapsulated in this word, 'brother'. B. Wordsworth is articulating a position on literary tradition which Naipaul himself feels unable to share. But in the character of Wordsworth, we recognise some of Naipaul's propensity towards self-mythologising, and self-definition as a writer.

In 'Prologue to an Autobiography', Naipaul's indefinite cultural identity is initially presented as disadvantageous to a developing writer. But given his project to illuminate the 'areas of darkness' which exist in his history, we come to understand Naipaul's realisation that his interstitial, hard-to-place cultural identity – the position of 'outsider' – is a distinct advantage as a writer, giving him access to a tradition he can wholly claim as his own. In fact, this position might even be regarded as a necessary qualification for the role of writer, that most self-defining of identities.

Naipaul's revisiting of his early years as a writer has the quality of myth-making about it, as does his use of generalisation – his use of the first person plural – or making universal what is essentially his own personal response to literary tradition ('To us, without a mythology, all literatures were foreign.'²²) He generalises when he claims that his English or French writer peers 'had grown up in a world that was more or less explained', failing to allow that not all aspiring English or French writers would see their world in print: that it is still possible to be of the metropole and find yourself as marginalised from mainstream society, as subjugated by the cultural elite,

19 Ibid., pp. 17-18

20 Ibid., p. 18

21 Cited in Ibid., p. 17

22 Naipaul, V.S., 'Jasmine', op.cit. p. 45-46

as any colonial subject. Naipaul's island has no mythology, no literary tradition: Naipaul offers himself.

And a large part of Naipaul's self-mythologising are his elisions regarding the notion of authorial influence and literary tradition. In a review of Thieme's *Web of Tradition*, Selwyn R. Cudjoe quotes Derek Walcott's response to Naipaul's *Enigma of Arrival*:

The myth of Naipaul as a phenomenon, as a singular, contradictory genius who survived the cane fields and the bush at great cost, has long since been a farce. It is a myth he chooses to encourage – though he alone knows why, since the existence of other writers in no way diminishes his gift.²³

Regarding Naipaul's quest for a tradition, Thieme credits Naipaul with finding, in his later novels, 'a partial solution in his acknowledgement of his indebtedness' to Conrad:

In a 1974 article he confesses 'It has taken me a long time to come round to Conrad'; eventually, however, he says he has come to realise that his fictional world is essentially the same as Conrad's, because they both deal with societies a world away from the 'highly organized societies' of the great novelists. Like Conrad, Naipaul has been absorbed into the English literary tradition and yet continues to see himself as a displaced outsider.²⁴

In his article, 'Conrad's Darkness', Naipaul goes on to quote Conrad's letter to Edward Garnett:

The year before, when he was suffering with 'The Rescue', Conrad had written to Garnett: 'Other writers have some starting point. Something to catch hold of... They lean on dialect – or on tradition – or on history – or on the prejudice or fad of the hour; they trade upon some tie or conviction of their time – or upon the absence of these things – which they can abuse or praise. But at any rate

23 Cudjoe, Selwyn R., 'John Thieme, The web of tradition: uses of allusion in V.S. Naipaul's fiction', in *KITLV*, Vol. 66, 1992. Retrieved March 2009, from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl/index.php/nwig/article/view/3329/4090>

24 Thieme, John, op.cit., p. 13

they know something to begin with – while I don't. I have had some impressions, some sensations – in my time... And it's all faded.' It is the complaint of a writer who is missing a society, and is beginning to understand that fantasy or imagination can move more freely within a closed and ordered world.²⁵

As an aspiring writer, Naipaul had access to compelling material in his experiences of the real-life counterpart to *Miguel Street*. But for reasons of colonial shame, his confused cultural identity, and the social and literary insecurities inherited from his father, he did not immediately recognise the literary possibilities of this experience. Despite the public nature of the community's life, lived largely on the street, and the often chaotic nature of its inhabitants' lives, here was precisely that 'closed and ordered world' he sought: a world from which outsiders were excluded and one which operated by strict codes of etiquette. Naipaul continues, in his discussion of Conrad's problems in writing 'The Return': 'A writer's disadvantages, when the work is done, can appear as advantages'²⁶.

5. *Disowning and owning tradition*

In 'Conrad's Darkness', Naipaul writes, 'The myths of great writers usually have to do with their work rather than their lives. More and more today, writers' myths are about the writers themselves; the work has become less obtrusive.'²⁷ Naipaul, as I have shown earlier, seems to subscribe to this belief.

And leaving aside this notion of 'great', Hanif Kureishi, whose fiction is also famously autobiographical, not to say confessional, might also be regarded as a self-mythologising writer. Inherent in the notion of a self-mythologising writer is a certain declaration of stance on the question of literary tradition. In his first novel, the avowedly autobiographical *The Buddha of Suburbia*²⁸, Kureishi's attitude to this inflects the refusal of his young protagonist to identify with tradition of any kind: 'Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging

25 Naipaul, V.S., 'Conrad's Darkness,' in *The Return of Eva Peron: With the Killings in Trinidad*, (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 218

26 Ibid., p. 226

27 Ibid., p. 226

28 Kureishi, Hanif, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1991)

and not, that makes me restless and easily bored.’²⁹

Contrast Naipaul’s attitude to literary tradition with Kureishi’s. Their respective approaches to literary tradition are of particular interest because of startling parallels in their backgrounds. Both are the sons of aspiring, but ultimately, unfulfilled writer fathers who urged their strong sense of vocation onto their eldest children. And both come from a background of cultural complexity and insecure social status.

Kureishi grew up in lower middle-class white suburbia as the Anglo-Pakistani son of a man from a high-ranking Pakistani patriarchy who had fallen somewhat in social status since his move to England. In his memoir, *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father*, Kureishi writes about his father’s literary ambitions by way of framing his own development as a writer. His father, self-exiled and living in Bromley, found some measure of stability in conforming to the certainties of English suburban life. He found an identity too, in his conception of himself as a writer: ‘If the absence of belonging is considered to be the immigrant’s particular bugbear, dad was fascinated by another kind of belonging, which might be called a vocation.’³⁰

As an adolescent Kureishi himself felt this ‘absence of belonging’. The casual racism he encountered at school in the suburbs reinforced the idea that he did not ‘belong’. But rather than presenting himself to us as excluded, Kureishi makes it clear that it is he who rejected suburban culture, never having felt a true product of that environment: his mother had trained at art school and now repressed her artistic impulses, while his father, as an immigrant with literary ambitions, was an interloper on two counts. In addition, through his worldly paternal uncle Omar, Kureishi had tasted something of London life and more urbane intellectual circles. Kureishi turned to writing as a way of reconciling the conflicting impulses which caused tension within his family. His writing was also a way of venting his frustration at being trapped in this limited, limiting world:

Then there was writing, which was an active way of taking possession of the world. I could be omnipotent, rather than a victim. Writing became a way of processing, ordering, what seemed like chaos. If I wrote because my father did, I soon learned that writing was the one place where I had dominion, where I

29 Ibid., p. 3

30 Kureishi, Hanif, *Dreaming and Scheming*, op.cit., p. 238

was in charge.³¹

This last phrase, ‘I was in charge’, signals young Kureishi’s approach to literary tradition. In terms of established literary tradition, as handed down to him at school, it is no surprise that he rejected all that he considered part of the establishment:

Where I did belong, I discovered, was in ‘pop’, then a haven for non-conformists and the creatively odd. Around this time my friends and I began to use marijuana and take LSD regularly. Until then I’d been, I think, not unlike a lot of boys, educationally anorexic. Nothing would go in; I wouldn’t let it in.³²

While Kureishi had rejected one literary tradition – that of the syllabus, or establishment – unlike Naipaul, who struggled for some years without one, young Kureishi had the confidence to metaphorically approach a group of writers he admired, and ask them to ‘budge up’:

One day someone gave me De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. I went from this to Hunter S. Thompson and after that never stopped reading. The dissipated writers, Bukowski, Henry Miller, Anais Nin, and then Roth, Salinger, Kerouac – artists who combined pleasure with art – seemed as self-destructive as pop stars. They were writers who eulogized wild, suffering young men in despair. This was both a picture of how I felt and a picture of who I wanted to be in certain parts of myself. I began to learn that literature was not respectable and didn’t only belong to the teachers or upholders of culture.³³

In reading books not recognised by the literary tradition handed down to him at school, Kureishi presents his acts of reading as a transgression against that tradition. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is characterised by a joyful sense of transgression: of class boundaries, with lower-middle class cultural insecurity pitted mercilessly against ethnic hybridity as a joyful, free and classless state, a passport to anywhere, with mutable notions of ‘Englishness’ inherent in the tensions between the colonial and

31 Ibid., p. 13

32 Ibid., p. 238

33 Ibid., p. 238

suburban.

In Naipaul's accounts of his formative reading experiences, however, he talks of gamely trying to make sense of what was handed to him, by effecting a rudimentary reimagining of the English texts, trying to transpose Dickens' Victorian England to Trinidad, for example, to lacklustre effect. Contrast this with Salman Rushdie's reading of Dickens as 'a quintessentially Indian novelist', or of Jane Austen:

When I first read the novels of Jane Austen, books out a country and time far removed from my own upbringing in metropolitan mid-twentieth-century Bombay, the thing that struck me about her heroines was how Indian, how contemporary they seemed. Those bright, willful, sharp-tongued women brimming with potential but doomed by narrow convention to an interminable *Huis Clos* of ballroom dancing and husband hunting, were women whose counterparts could be found throughout the Indian bourgeoisie.³⁴

It takes intellectual confidence to read a 19th century novel set among the English middle-classes and to see within it a depiction of your own upper-class Muslim milieu in 1950s Bombay. More than that, it takes a sense of entitlement: a sense that you have the right to read that book, and that your reading of it is as valid as the author's right to write it.

Naipaul's failure to 'translate' Dickens in this way is a kind of deference: he does not feel equal to the task. This diffidence might be attributable to Naipaul's inherited notions of hierarchy – a legacy of the Hindu caste-based culture in which he was raised, as well as the British colonial regime in pre-independence Trinidad which typically promoted a hierarchy of ethnicities. Significant too was his father's insecure social status relating to the mismatch between his great literary ambitions and his patchy career as a journalist, and his resulting financial dependence on his wife's family. As a man of no status in a large Hindu matriarchy, disconnected from its Indian roots, he resembles the emasculated men of *Miguel Street*³⁵.

However, Naipaul must take responsibility for his disenfranchisement from

34 Rushdie, Salman, *Step Across this Line: Non-fiction, 1992-2002*, (London: Johnathan Cape, 2002), p. 64

35 I am grateful to John Thieme for pointing out that Naipaul Senior of course also resembles the protagonist of *A House for Mr Biswas*, since this is Naipaul's fictionalised biography of his father. I must also thank John for pointing out that in this novel Naipaul went on to effect a kind of deferred translation of Dickens since it is indebted to Wells's *History of Mr Polly*, itself heavily influenced by Dickens.

the prevailing literary culture: he allowed himself to be intimidated by it. A different kind of writer with a more pioneering spirit like Kureishi, for example, might have viewed this lack of literary landmarks as an opportunity to stake out his own territory³⁶.

Rushdie – equally subject to a literary tradition not his own, but part of the colonial legacy which formed the foundation of his public school education – seems to effect a more confident act of cultural translation on the English literary tradition. More successful, perhaps because of his more secure cultural and social identity (resolutely upper-middle-class and Muslim). It is this concept of cultural translation I would like to explore further: more specifically, the extent to which it might be seen to constitute an act of cultural assertion.

6. *Gained in Translation*

My aim in presenting Naipaul and Kureishi's contrasting approaches to literary tradition, as refracted through their first published works of fiction, is to consider how a writer might use their fiction to engage with their sense of cultural identity. In this chapter, I have shown how *Paul et Virginie* has become a symbol of the sense I have of myself as a 'translated' being; my aim is to show how 'translating' *Paul et Virginie* constitutes a way of engaging intellectually with this idea, and, not so much mitigating the psychological confusion inherent in the notion of a translated being, but of asserting the richness and complexity of that identity, in all its incoherence.

In the following chapter, I will consider Mishra's reading of *A Sentimental Education*, as presented in his essays and in his novel *The Romantics*, which engages explicitly with the themes of cultural identity and literary tradition. I will consider how *The Romantics* might function as a 'cannibalistic translation' of the original novel. My aim is to provide a framework against which I might consider the relationship which exists between my own experiences of reading *Paul et Virginie*, and my rewriting of it in *Genie and Paul*.

36 However, we cannot ignore the fact that Kureishi came to maturity during the era of Punk, and as an unwilling member of a Suburban community was well-placed to exploit the freedoms and sense of license that movement offered to the disenfranchised.

Chapter Two: Reading and Translation in Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics*

1. Introduction

So far, in contextualising the discussion of my rewriting of *Paul et Virginie*, I've suggested a possible link, in the case of certain writers who share a 'many-sided background', between their 'imaginative promptings' – that is, the larval stages of their writerly vocation – and the complex cultural context in which these writers first consciously encounter the notion of a literary tradition.

I have suggested that such young writers might well develop a problematised relationship with the prevailing literary tradition, or even the notion of a literary tradition itself: a result of the tensions between their heterogeneous sense of identity – fluid, confused, complex or fragmented – and the homogeneous cultural hegemony of which a dominant literary tradition is part.³⁷

Such a difficult relationship with literary tradition is bound to impact on a developing writer's sensibility. I have illustrated this with the examples of Naipaul and Kureishi, whose responses to literary tradition as young writers I characterise as defensive and antagonistic respectively. One outcome of their respective conflicts is a resulting sense of writerly self-consciousness, a constant self-questioning which plays out in their practice as a compulsion towards self-reflexiveness, in the form of the writer's essay. It might well be said of such writers that in the absence of a coherent cultural identity, they seize on the identity of 'writer' (or perhaps, 'Writer'). In this chapter I'd like to extend my enquiry into self-consciousness and literary identity to consider Pankaj Mishra, a writer who has dramatised his own formative encounter with literary tradition through fiction.

2. Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics*

In Pankaj Mishra's debut novel, *The Romantics*, he examines the themes of uncertain cultural identity, literary tradition, and the profound effects of an encounter between

37 This relates specifically to writers who came to maturity before the digital age. As Sherry Simon writes, 'Increasingly...we find that Western society as a whole has turned into an immense contact zone, where intercultural relations contribute to the internal life of all national cultures.' 'Translating and interlingual creation in the contact zone: Border writing in Quebec', in *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, eds. Bassnett, Susan and Trivedi, Harish, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 58

the two. What is of particular significance to my own practice in *Genie and Paul* is that the protagonist's fraught engagement with literary tradition focuses on a specific text: Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education*. The real-life experience on which *The Romantics* is based was previously examined by Mishra in his 1998 *New York Review of Books* essay, 'Edmund Wilson in Benares' (later reprinted as 'Benares: Learning to Read'³⁸). Mishra has used the story of his relationship with *A Sentimental Education* to creative effect: spotting the possibilities for interplay, he has drawn out the resonances which exist between the original text and the context in which he came to read and understand it, amplifying and manipulating these in his recasting of lived experience as non-fiction; then, with a greater degree of creativity – or manipulation – as fiction, in *The Romantics*. I would characterise Mishra's process here as translation, and his subsequent use of *A Sentimental Education* as a creative translation, just as I would my own use of *Paul et Virginie* in *Genie and Paul*. My aim is to examine Mishra's personal relationship with *A Sentimental Education* as set out in his non-fiction³⁹, together with his reworking of this account into fiction, to provide an analytical framework for the discussion of creative translation within my own practice in Chapter Three.

Translation is a useful term in defining Mishra's process in the writing of *The Romantics*. But what might the broader implications be of considering Mishra's rewriting of an existing text in this way? Is the resulting text a translation? I think the answer to both questions lies in considering *The Romantics* in its cultural context, that is, as a novel in English by an Indian writer.

(i) *Translation and new writing in India*

In his essay 'Translation as New Writing', Sujit Mukherjee, comments on the inadvertent appropriateness of Penguin's title for a 1974 anthology, *New Writing in India*, which included several translations of Indian work from other Indian languages into English: 'Until the advent of Western culture in India, we had always regarded translation as new writing.'⁴⁰ Mukherjee gives an account of the historical practice of translating texts from one Indian language into another and the fluid relationship

38 Mishra, Pankaj, 'Benares: Learning to Read', in *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond* (Picador, London 2006). All references to Mishra's autobiographical essay are to this later version.

39 In particular, his essay (Ibid.)

40 Mukherjee, Sujit, 'Translation as New Writing' in Baker, Mona, ed., *Critical Concepts in Linguistics: Translation Studies*, Vol I, (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 54

between ‘original’ texts (often themselves translations of translations) and their translations, as well as the high degree of adaptation and rewriting accepted as part of Indian translation practice. He contrasts this with the Western view of translation as ‘inferior’ to the precursor text⁴¹, based on a dearly-held notion of originality and a concomitant subservience to the notion of ‘fidelity’. Of the concept of fidelity to the original in Indian translation practice, Mukherjee says this:

That translation is new writing need not justify new writing being a form of surreptitious translation. *Rupantar* (meaning ‘change in form’) and *anuvad* (‘speaking after’ or ‘following’) are the commonly understood senses of translation in India, and neither term demands fidelity to the original. The notion that even literary translation is a faithful rendering of the original came to us from the West, perhaps in the wake of the Bible and the need felt by Christian missionaries to have it translated into different Indian languages.⁴²

The acts of appropriation and reinvention which inform the practice of translation in India are antithetical to conventional Western notions of boundaries, of ownership and authorship, the divergence between the two perspectives – Western and Indian – attributable, says Ganesh Devy, in his essay, ‘Translation and Literary History: An Indian View’, to the respective metaphysics of the two cultures. Devy contrasts Western and Indian traditions of translation, comparing Western translation in the following way.

[As] an exile, a fall from the origin...Given this metaphysical precondition of Western aesthetics, it is not surprising that literary translations are not accorded the same status as original works. Western literary criticism provides for the guilt of translations for coming into being after the original; the temporal sequentiality is held as a proof of diminution of literary authenticity [*sic*] of translations.

In contrast, Indian metaphysics believes in an unhindered migration of the

41 See Bassnet’s introduction to *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Edited by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London, US & Canada: Routledge, 1999) for a summary of notions of the original and translation in the West, prior to the advent of the printing press.

42 Mukherjee, *op.cit.*, p. 54

soul from one body to another. Repeated birth is the very substance of all animate creations. When the soul passes from one body to another, it does not lose any of its essential significance. Indian philosophies of the relationship between form and essence, structure and significance are guided by this metaphysics. The soul, or significance, is not subject to laws of temporality; and therefore, significance, even literary significance, is ahistorical in Indian view [*sic*].⁴³

In other words, everything is up for grabs. Successive generations of Indian writers feel entitled to use all elements of any book says Devy

because Indian literary theory does not lay undue emphasis on originality. If originality were made a criterion of literary excellence, a majority of Indian classics would fail the test. The true test is the writer's capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original. And in that sense Indian literary traditions are essentially traditions of translation.⁴⁴

To be a creative writer in India, then, is to engage by definition in translation in the intertextual sense, and to feel a great degree of freedom and entitlement in creative engagement with existing texts. Mukherjee quotes the Calcutta-based translator, publisher and poet Purushottam Lal on the creativity of the translator in India: 'Faced by such a variety of material, the translator must edit, reconcile and transmute; his job in many ways becomes largely a matter of transcreation.'⁴⁵ If there is little or no distinction made between the creative writer and the translator in India, then the term 'transcreation' might also serve as a useful description of the creative writer's practice (and resulting text). But these discussions are concerned primarily with Indian rewritings of Indian texts. What is the effect of this practice when enacted outside an Indian context? What happens when an Indian writer rewrites or translates a foreign text? In terms of an interlingual translation, Mukerhjee states:

With the sanction of traditional practice behind them, some of our writers have

43 Devy, Ganesh, 'Translation and Literary History: An Indian View', in Baker, op.cit, p. 182

44 Devy, op.cit., p.187

45 Mukherjee, op.cit., p. 58

been known to employ a kind of translation which assimilates a foreign text into an Indian language so well that the Indian language work appears to be a strange and new thing altogether.⁴⁶

But what questions are raised when the practice of transcreation is effected on a Western text by an Indian writer in English? Specifically, what are the cultural implications for Mishra's translation in this context? I will return to this question after a close examination of how Mishra has translated *A Sentimental Education*.

(ii) *A Tale of Two Readings*

Central to Mishra's texts examining his relationship to *A Sentimental Education* – his essay and his novel – lies this story of a life-changing encounter. In both accounts, an impoverished young Hindu of the Brahmin caste moves to the North Indian city of Benares (now Varanasi) in the late 1980s, shortly after graduating from university. His intention is to continue the life he led as a student, to do nothing but read. Specifically, he intends to continue a course of self-education in the classics of Western literature, aware that he cannot defer indefinitely serious questions about his future. But Benares, this ancient, and holiest of cities to Hindus, cannot resist change indefinitely: the country is undergoing a period of rapid political and economic development and is becoming commercialised, Westernized, politicised and corrupt. This young man - the narrator in both the essay and the novel - is befriended by Rajesh, a student. A fellow Brahmin and something of a self-appointed protector to the narrator, Rajesh is involved in the region's increasingly violent sectarian student politics. The two have little in common, apart from membership of an increasingly marginalised and powerless caste⁴⁷, a disenfranchisement made more pointed by the fact that the city where they live is one of great religious significance for Hindus. Rajesh does not understand the narrator's obsession with Western literature. So in an attempt to communicate with him, the narrator lends Rajesh a book, Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education*, and a copy of an essay on the novel by his hero, Edmund Wilson. He thinks nothing more of this until years later, long after he has moved away

46 Ibid., p. 55-56

47 See Didur, Jill, "An Unremembered Time": Secular Criticism in Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics*, in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 44 no. 2, June 2009, pp. 65-85. The essay gives a historical context for the diminishing status of the Brahmin caste in the late 1980s as presented in both Mishra's essay and novel.

and the friendship has disintegrated amid rumours of Rajesh's involvement in Benares' criminal underworld. It's only when the narrator comes across a copy of the Wilson essay marked up by Rajesh that he appreciates his friend's reading of the novel, and understands how its themes might have been horribly relevant to Rajesh's circumstances. At this point the narrator remembers a cryptic comment made by Rajesh about the book some years before on a visit to Rajesh's mother, an old widow living in rural poverty. At the time Rajesh claimed to have understood the book, much to the narrator's surprise: he himself struggled with both the novel and Wilson's analysis of it. It is only now, looking at the Wilson essay marked up by Rajesh, that the narrator understands the meaning of Rajesh's comment, and what the visit to Rajesh's childhood home was intended to convey to him.

So at the heart of both texts then – Mishra's essay and the novel – is the story of two readings: Rajesh's and the narrator's readings of *A Sentimental Education*, and Wilson's essay on it. But *The Romantics* is something of a Russian doll within which a number of further readings are nested. These might be separated out as follows:

- Samar's reading of *A Sentimental Education*
- Samar's reading of Edmund Wilson's reading of *A Sentimental Education*
- Rajesh's reading of *A Sentimental Education*
- Rajesh's reading of Edmund Wilson's reading of *A Sentimental Education*
- Samar's reading of Rajesh's reading of *A Sentimental Education* and the Wilson essay

Of course, informing these is the reading central to this novel: Mishra's own reading of both the Wilson essay (as articulated in 'Benares: Learning to Read'), and *A Sentimental Education* itself. So these readings are contained not only at a narrative level, but also textually and subtextually.

I would like to reconsider the term 'reading' in connection with Mishra's encounter with *A Sentimental Education* in relation to both his essay and *The Romantics*, with a view to positing the latter's status as a creative translation. But before doing so, I think it would be useful to offer an analysis of these nested readings.

(iii) *Reading and Translation in Pankaj Mishra's The Romantics*

In 'Step Across This Line'⁴⁸, Rushdie identifies a need for Indian writers to 'translate' India into English, an idea which came to him on reading Vladimir Nabokov's 'Note on Translation'. Nabokov, writes Rushdie, identifies three 'grades of evil', or levels of transgressions, committed by inept literary translators or those with unliterary motives; these grades corresponding to the degree of the translator's intent, ranging from mistranslation through ignorance, to deliberate perversion of a text's meaning to conform to societal prejudices. I want to focus on the second 'grade of evil' identified by Nabokov and how Rushdie co-opts this into his scheme for 'translating' India:

'The next step to Hell,' Nabokov says, 'is taken by the translator who skips words or passages that he does not bother to understand or that might seem obscure or obscene to vaguely imagined readers.' For a long time, or so I felt, almost the whole of the multifarious Indian reality was 'skipped' in this way by writers who were uninterested in anything except western experiences of India ... written up in a coolly classical western manner.⁴⁹

The Romantics is written in exactly the manner, or style, (Naipaulian, perhaps) which Rushdie condemns here. Mishra seems to deliberately incite Rushdie's condemnation: this might be India written up in a 'coolly classical western manner'⁵⁰, but far from being 'uninterested in anything except western experiences of India', the book examines a young Indian man's engagement with the West – both in terms of his encounters with Westerners, and his reading of Western classics – on Indian soil. *The Romantics* is a novel about reading, 'misreading' and translation, in the sense of carrying across meaning. The protagonist Samar's act of reading books comes to signify something more than his obvious hunger for Western culture or escape from his own limited circumstances. Samar *defines* himself by his reading, a self-image developed from earliest childhood: when explaining his relationship with his now distant father, he describes how the latter would read to him from the *Mahabharata*; this text is mentioned again in reference to his trip to Kulpi, when Samar talks about the happiness he feels in the Himalayas, 'It was the first landscape I had known in my

48 Rushdie, Salman, 'Step Across This Line', in *Step Across this Line*, op.cit

49 Ibid., p. 374

50 Sabin, Margery, *Dissenters and Mavericks: Writings about India in English 1765-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), p. 177: 'Rather than the phantasmagoria of Rushdie, so influential in the past two decades, Mishra prefers the model of the Russian realists of the nineteenth century—Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Chekhov...'

imagination, in the stories from the *Mahabharata*.⁵¹ And when describing his childhood, and how far removed it was from his friend Rajesh's own impoverished rural upbringing, Samar lists the cosy books he read then – Enid Blyton and *Tin Tin*. Tellingly, these are Western texts. Books dominate Samar's young adulthood too. 'In Benares, I wanted to read, and do as little as possible besides that. The city, its antiquity, its special pleasures, held little attraction for me.'⁵² But Samar's reading limits him, as much as it defines him. His lack of interest in the city extends also to its inhabitants, or the Indian ones at least. He seems to show little interest in his contemporaries: not Anand, the young sitar player he meets through a neighbour, nor even, to begin with, Rajesh, the fellow Brahmin he meets at the local University. Samar's lack of connection with these men is not simply founded on a difference in ambition, moral perspective or political belief, although this is implied by Samar himself; rather, his distance from them is entirely self-imposed, because he wants only to form connections with his books.

This distance is further emphasised by the nature of his reading matter: he reads nothing but classics of Western philosophy and literature. It is this hunger for Western culture perhaps, which makes him vulnerable to the approaches of his neighbour Miss West, who wants to draw him into her circle of young, Western acquaintances, or 'seekers' as she refers to them. When Samar finally enters into Miss West's circle, it is no surprise that in this unfamiliar milieu his knowledge of Western literature becomes a social crutch for him, albeit one he relies on unconsciously. Books become a way by which he can impress Catherine, a young Frenchwoman with whom he becomes infatuated, and by extension, her visiting European friends. Books also allow him to judge others and feel superior to them: the American Debbie, for example, who professes a desire to see South America after having read Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in The Time of Cholera*. Her response, when asked why she likes his books, is, to Samar, vacuous. So books become Samar's way of defining other people too, and a way of defining himself to other people, a way of masking (or so he believes) his intellectual insecurity and of perhaps unconsciously re-establishing some sense of social hierarchy in the face of ever-deteriorating certainties of caste and an insecure cultural identity.

Samar views books as a convenient way to access intellectual prestige. It is

51 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., p. 124

52 Ibid., p. 6

also a means of accessing a portion of that sense of entitlement he sees the Westerners around him enjoying. It is a way of appearing to be, like his hero Edmund Wilson, ‘a man with a clear vision of the world, which new discoveries continually expanded – in short, the man I secretly longed to be.’⁵³ And yet, Mishra shows, as is always the case with convenience goods, when it comes to Samar’s reading and, by extension, to his view of people, something valuable is lost through his self-serving approach. Nowhere is this more evident than in his judgement of Rajesh. Given the cultural value Samar places on books, then, it is significant that when Samar first meets him, Rajesh is reading Faiz, ‘The Pakistani exile, the poet of heartbreak and loss.’⁵⁴ It is significant too that when asked by Rajesh if he has also read Faiz, Samar simply replies that he has. Odd that someone whose life is so defined by books and reading should have no comment to make, not even in internal monologue, about a poet he claims to have read.

We are told frequently by Samar that he has only ever seen Rajesh read Faiz and ‘the Hindu newspapers’. After Rajesh has read Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education*, which he borrows from Samar, he claims to know these people well. Samar is confused: ‘What could Rajesh, a student in a provincial Indian university in the late 1980s, possibly have in common with Frédéric Moreau or any of the doomed members of his generation in this novel of nineteenth-century Paris?’⁵⁵ His question is connected with his previous, pointed observations about Rajesh’s reading habits. It is also connected with his own failure to gain any meaning from the book himself, even with the help of Wilson’s essay, ‘The Politics of Flaubert’.⁵⁶

It is ironic that Samar feels the experience of India for an outsider should be mitigated somehow (‘It seemed a bit excessive and unnecessary to me, imposing “Indian” ways upon a first-time visitor’⁵⁷), but is too humble to expect Western culture to be translated for him or others like him. When Samar reads, he seeks to meet the writer on their own terms but often fails. He describes his ‘confused attempts at self-education’⁵⁸ which had seen him read randomly without understanding the

53 Ibid., p. 94

54 Ibid., p. 25

55 Ibid., p. 175

56 Wilson, Edmund, ‘The Politics of Flaubert’, in *The Triple Thinkers: Twelve Essays on Literary Subjects*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), pp. 72-87

57 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., p. 47

58 Ibid., p. 92

social, historical and material contexts of these English works. And, on his first reading of *A Sentimental Education*, he finishes it out of pure stubbornness: ‘the novel had passed me by, like many other books at the time’⁵⁹. He puts it back on the shelf along with ‘some other conscientiously read but unabsorbed books’⁶⁰. After reading Edmund Wilson’s essay on the novel, however, he attempts a second reading, and this time wrests some meaning from the text. However he sees in it primarily the drama of the characters, and in particular, Frédéric Moreau. The limitations of his reading become apparent once, later, we learn of Rajesh’s own reading of the book: it seems that, like Nabokov’s translator committing the second degree of evil, Samar is being a lazy reader, mentally skipping over bits he doesn’t understand. Samar, as he himself later indicates, has been guilty of reading for the ‘wrong’ reasons, and because of this is made unhappy and confused by his reading: just as the seekers who come to India for the ‘wrong’ reasons do not find what they are seeking and become unhappy and confused by their failure.

This realisation comes to Samar when, years later, he comes across the Edmund Wilson essay he lent Rajesh, who he now sees has underlined certain phrases. From these, Samar is able to broadly piece together Rajesh’s reading of the novel. This, together with the memory of Rajesh’s initial comments on the novel (‘I know these people well’) and the surprisingly elegant letter he has just received from him after the two have drifted apart, leads Samar to re-read *A Sentimental Education* once again. Samar finally comes to a deeper understanding of the book and its relevance to Rajesh’s place in contemporary Indian society. Rajesh, if you like, has translated the novel for Samar.

Rajesh’s reading of *A Sentimental Education* is the purest act of reading in the book. He does not read for self-improvement, for reasons of intellectual snobbery or class consciousness: he reads out of pure curiosity. He brings no expectations to his reading, no agenda, and in the end, his reading proves to be more insightful than the ostensibly more literate Samar’s. Flaubert himself urged, ‘Don’t read *A Sentimental Education* like children, for diversion, nor for instruction, like ambitious persons; no, read it in order to live.’⁶¹ This dictum might apply to the notion of reading as a whole,

59 Ibid., p. 154

60 Ibid., p. 154

61 Cited in, Parmée, Douglass, ‘Introduction’ to Flaubert, Gustave, *A Sentimental Education*, trans. Parmée, Douglass, (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1989), p. xxvii

in the novel.

How ironic then, that the reward for Rajesh's purity of motive should be an understanding of the final truth that, as Flaubert himself says of *A Sentimental Education*: 'there's a fundamental stupidity in mankind which is as eternal as life itself.'⁶² In understanding Rajesh's reading, and thereby grasping the paucity of his own, Samar realises that as well as misunderstanding the book, he has misunderstood Rajesh. This becomes apparent when he receives a letter from his estranged friend:

I had never seen his handwriting before. He wrote a beautiful Devanagari script, and there was an elegant formality in his prose which I thought would have come to him from the Urdu poetry he read...Such a considered response made me wonder if I had ever really known him.⁶³

A further irony lies in the fact that after reading the book for the third time Samar ruefully acknowledges the truth of Edmund Wilson's assertion that in order to understand the book, one must have seen something of life. This supports Flaubert's comment that the book should not be looked to for instruction: one can only understand it if one has seen something of life, which means, as Rajesh himself proves, that it is already too late to learn from the book.

In 'The Politics of Flaubert', Wilson quotes Flaubert's hopes for an enlightened humanity, free of the diminishing effects of government or religion: 'The soul is asleep today, drunk with the words she has listened to, but she will experience a wild awakening, in which she will give herself up to the ecstasies of liberation, for there will be nothing more to constrain her...'⁶⁴ We can only imagine, since Samar does not, the impact of these words on Rajesh who has twice quoted the following lines from Faiz (when we first meet him, and in his letter to Samar): 'This is not that long-looked-for break of day / Not that clear dawn in quest of which those comrades / set out'.⁶⁵

Rushdie, in the essay cited above, refers to the personal memories of Faiz, a family friend, which led him to develop his ideas on this theme, 'It's as important, he

62 Cited in *Ibid.*, p. vii

63 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., p. 247

64 Wilson, op.cit., p. 87

65 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., pp. 27 and 247

seems to be saying as he knocks back his blasphemous whisky, to cross metaphorical lines as well as actual ones: not to be contained or defined by anybody else's idea of where a line should be drawn.'⁶⁶ Samar, in his efforts to become something he is not, to become the kind of man he thinks he should be, the kind of man he believes Edmund Wilson to have been, is bound by the line he has drawn for himself. But Rajesh, who sees the truth in Flaubert's novel and relates it to his own life despite the gap between cultures and lifetimes, steps across it.

(iv) Reading as Translation

The limitations of the word 'reading' to define the various acts of interpretation which exist in and around *The Romantics* become apparent when one considers that the same term can be used to describe both Rajesh's encounter with *A Sentimental Education* and the American Debbie's of *Love in The Time of Cholera*. Debbie does little more than take in a story while Rajesh's reading is considered, profound and transformational. In the ensuing discussion of the Ur-act of reading inscribed in *The Romantics* – Mishra's own reading of *A Sentimental Education* – I will use the term 'translation' in preference to 'reading' in order to accommodate also an analysis of Mishra's approach and technique in his writing of *The Romantics*.

I see many parallels between the process Mishra has undergone in his writing of *The Romantics* and the journey I have undertaken in my writing of *Genie and Paul*. To theorise Mishra's process here is to go some way towards theorising mine; theorising my own practice is a step towards developing it further; defining terms is a step in that theorising.

The semantic relationship between reading and translation is a common enough trope in translation studies and poststructuralist theory. In his essay, 'On Translation as Creation and Criticism', the Brazilian poet and translator, Haroldo de Campos quotes J. Salas Subirat, the Spanish translator of Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'Translating is the most attentive form of reading',⁶⁷ while Spivak, quoting the Preface to her translation of Mahasweta Devi's poetry in 'The Politics of Translation' refers to translation as, 'the most intimate form of reading'⁶⁸. If we invert this

66 Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, op.cit., p. 382

67 de Campos, Haroldo, 'On Translation as Creation and Criticism', in Baker, op.cit, p. 139

68 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'The Politics of Translation', in *The Translation Studies Reader*, Venuti, Lawrence, ed., (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 369

formulation, an intimate reading – one in which the reader is personally invested, one from which the reader emerges changed – might itself be said to constitute a translation. The most intimate act of reading at the heart of *The Romantics* is Rajesh’s reading of both Wilson’s essay and *A Sentimental Education*, or rather, Samar’s reading of Rajesh’s reading. As I have already stated, Rajesh ‘translates’ *A Sentimental Education* for Samar. Rather than ‘readings’ then, there are several types of *translation* which occur in and around *The Romantics*. The most significant of these is Mishra’s reading, or translation, of *A Sentimental Education* and is inscribed within the text of his novel. Before I discuss this further, I will clarify my use of the term ‘translation’.

Sergio Waisman, in his study of Borges’ theories of literary translation, attributes the increasing appeal of translation theory to scholars outside the field to ‘the usefulness of thinking of translation as a metaphor for reading and writing.’⁶⁹ So as well as a kind of applied reading, translation also suggests the act of writing. In other words, it suggests a process: the interwoven acts of reading, writing and – since ‘translation’ of course suggests the existence of a foundational pre-text – *rewriting*. In summary, the term ‘translation’ defines the process of creating a text which is directly based on another.⁷⁰ For this reason, ‘translation’ is a useful way to describe the complex genesis of *The Romantics* – from its beginnings as a real-life encounter with the text of *A Sentimental Education*, to the documentation of this experience in an essay, to the final manipulation of this autobiographical text into fiction, using the Ur-text for these subsequent rewritings as a tool with which to shape the resulting fiction.

The term ‘translation’ carries further resonance here. Implied is the notion of a relationship, or a series of relationships: between the reader and the text, the original and the translated text, but also, between two languages, and by extension, two cultures. Earlier, I outlined the many nested readings which occur in *The Romantics*. These readings enact relationships: between the respective readers of the various texts concerned, between the texts themselves, and between the readers of those texts. And in Rajesh’s reading of *A Sentimental Education*, a relationship between two cultures: the late nineteenth-century Paris of Flaubert’s novel, and the Indian city of Benares in

69 Waisman, Sergio Gabriel, *Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), p. 88

70 In a footnote to Waisman’s definition of translation he cites Frances Aparicio: ‘What was previously limited to the designation of a transfer from one language to another, is now disseminated as a metaphor of the act of reading and writing in all of its phenomenological complexity.’ *Ibid.*, p. 227

the late 1980s.

(v) *'The Romantics' as translation of A Sentimental Education*

In his novel, *Things: A Story of the Sixties*⁷¹ Georges Perec claimed to have 'used' Flaubert (specifically *A Sentimental Education*) on three levels: sentence rhythm, key scenes, and sentences themselves.⁷² Mishra's 'use', or translation, of *A Sentimental Education* also exists on several levels. My aim here is not to present a detailed account of Mishra's translation of *A Sentimental Education*, but to consider the broad way in which he has 'used' Flaubert and to consider what function this translation might play in Mishra's project, and process. I will consider the different levels of translation which have been effected, which will necessitate a focus on the parallels between the two books, and offer examples of each of these. This will act as a model for Chapter Three's analysis of my own use of *Paul et Virginie* in *Genie and Paul*.

There are obvious parallels between *The Romantics* and *A Sentimental Education*. Both feature as their protagonist a callow young man moving to a new city to begin his adult life at a time of great social and political flux, and both protagonists are drawn into an unsatisfactory love affair which remains largely unrequited. In both cases, the romantic adventure is a false trail for the reader and the novel's focus gradually drifts away: the affair, we realise, was just one facet of the broader theme of disillusionment and failure. And both feature, in Rajesh and Dussardier, enigmatic, noble men of integrity and consistent beliefs, who act as the moral compass of the novels. Neither is accorded the respect they are due by the protagonists until they come to the end of their respective storylines, which are both marked by a sense of self-sacrifice. But despite the similarities between the two novels, Mishra does not effect a like-for-like translation. Instead he has manipulated elements of the original, to more effectively communicate his particular themes. I will consider the most significant of these elements: characterisation; irony and point-of-view; and themes.

(vi) *Characterisation*

Samar would appear to be the counterpoint to Frédéric Moreau. And yet, in the character of Catherine, Samar's love interest, we do not have a counterpoint to Frédéric's Madame Arnoux; I would argue that Catherine herself represents another

71 Perec, George, *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, Bellos, David, trans., (London: The Harvill Press, 1999)

72 Perec, George, 'George Perec Owns Up,' in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13. Issue 1, 1993, P. 16

aspect of Frédéric. The solidly bourgeois French background and financial and emotional dependence on a disapproving parent is one obvious parallel. But the parallel becomes more apparent when we consider Catherine's relationship with the young Indian sitar player, Anand; her idealisation of Anand is comparable with Frédéric's of Madame Arnoux. For Catherine, Anand is a symbol of something she desires, something to believe in. She makes him the focus of her life without really knowing much about him, in much the same way that for Frédéric, Madame Arnoux becomes the locus of his unfocused desires. Anand is also a counterpoint to Frédéric's friend Deslauriers. Deslauriers, of lower social status, clings to his richer friend's empty, impulsive promises and develops a sense of entitlement to Frédéric's friendship and financial generosity. This is echoed in the way Anand, a poor village boy, relies unquestioningly on Catherine's sketchy plans for a move to Paris and a new life, 'Anand...was already looking forward to going to Paris; he spoke of this with the curious serenity that I had seen come over him, the serenity that with Catherine by his side, things could not but turn out well for him.'⁷³

Translating the Frédéric/Mme Arnoux and Deslaurier/Frédéric friendship in this way – collapsing the two relationships into one and adding a sexual/romantic dimension –exacerbates the huge gulf between Catherine and Anand:

So dissimilar they appeared: Anand, fidgety and intense, who, with his thin face and tormented looks, would always be associated with the warren of dark slumbering alleys around us; and Catherine, looking in her calm self-possession, as she would always do, from another world, richer and more fulfilled than the one she lived in now.⁷⁴

The sexual/romantic dimension allows Mishra to expose with exquisite delicacy the special vulnerabilities that characterise encounters between subjects from such disparate cultures: the heartbreaking hope of escape and the ignorant and humiliating romanticisation of poverty and brutality.

(vii) Irony and Point-of-view

Mishra's ironic detachment towards his characters echoes Flaubert's. In his review of

73 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., p. 61

74 Ibid., p. 16

A Sentimental Education, Mishra writes of Flaubert's project to deny his characters individual consciousness in order to privilege the representation of a generation, 'Accordingly, he denied a complex self-consciousness and sense of purpose to Frédéric Moreau, his primary protagonist. Frédéric dreams a great deal; but nothing comes of his grand plans for success in art, business, journalism and politics.'⁷⁵ Flaubert employs irony to enhance this distancing effect from his individual characters, specifically in his use of free indirect discourse: we are privy to the characters' thoughts, and yet the narrator chooses not to comment on them, however banal or ridiculous. It is within the space created by this authorial silence that irony is allowed to flourish: the stupidity of Flaubert's characters resounds all the more loudly.

And it is free indirect discourse which facilitates Flaubert's aim to portray the mores of a generation: that we are privy to all the main characters' thoughts, and the accretion of so much banality, duplicity and selfishness, facilitates the depiction of a generation's consciousness (or arguably lack thereof) and damns them collectively for their individual failings.

In *The Romantics*, irony flourishes in the gap created through the medium of time, rather than through point-of-view: Mishra employs the first person in his novel, but the experiences of young Samar are related by an older Samar. The irony in 'Benares: Learning to Read', achieves its particular dynamic via the temporal cross-currents within which the narrative is caught. Irony in *The Romantics* arises in the gap between the younger Samar's experiences and the older Samar's relating of them: at the level of narrative action, the older Samar refrains from comment on his younger self's thoughts and actions, leaving a silence freighted with irony. For example, when Anand tells Samar about his ambitions for launching his music career once Catherine has taken him to Paris, Samar thinks: 'I had no awareness of how the music industry worked, but felt that the success Anand projected in his immediate future couldn't be so easily achieved.'⁷⁶ There is irony too, of course, in young Samar's silence in the face of other characters' speech or actions, as seen in this example. Irony arises in the gap between Samar's apparent tacit agreement with what they say (i.e. his silence) and with what he privately thinks about what they say and do. The older, more

75 Mishra, Pankaj, Untitled essay on *A Sentimental Education*, Retrieved May 2009, http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/nf/shared/WebDisplay/0,,213486_1_10,00.html

76 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., p. 61

worldly Samar understates young Samar's reactions, to better reflect both his ignorance and diffidence: the older Samar, like us, knows that the music industry is a brutal rendering plant, and that big cities are full of Anands who arrive by the plane load every day, keen to join the queue. So young Samar appears to escape the overt authorial irony to which other characters are subjected: the apparently free-spirited and rebellious Catherine eventually reverts to bourgeois type, returning to France to marry a banker. We learn of this news only incidentally via Miss West, and so her devastating fate is reduced to the level of gossip. But however brutal and dismissive the fate of Catherine and other of the characters at Mishra's hands, he saves the greatest, most devastating irony for Samar himself. In Mishra's use of allusion and his translation of key parts of *A Sentimental Education*, in his recasting of these passages to feature Samar, his protagonist is made to enact unconsciously – or without acknowledging awareness at least – moments from a book he himself has professed not to understand. For example, Samar's romantic friendship with a much younger girl who idolises him, Priya, the niece of his father's companion, is a direct counterpart to Frédéric Moreau's friendship with Louise Roque, the daughter of his mother's neighbour. Mishra's presentation of Samar as an unconscious vessel of the plot, and not as a fully-formed consciousness with agency, is reminiscent of Flaubert's lack of interest in his characters as individuals. This is an aspect of one of the key themes which Mishra translates from *A Sentimental Education*: that of fate and determinism.

(viii) *Thematic translation*

When Samar, disaffected and passive, reads *A Sentimental Education*, he finds that:

Something of Hindu fatalism seemed to come off its pages, a sense of life as drift and futility and illusion, and to see it dramatized so completely through a wide range of human experience was to have, even at twenty, with so little experience of anything, a chilling intimation of the life ahead.⁷⁷

This is Samar's interpretation of the kind of bourgeois ennui represented by Frédéric's aimlessness, his inconsistent, changeable nature, and the presiding sense of

77 Ibid., p. 155

determinism as he and his peers are caught up in the currents of historical events they are powerless or too passive to resist. The subsequent references in *The Romantics* to Hindu concepts of fatalism, the associated concepts of illusion and the void, inevitably evoke Flaubert's post-Romantic ennui, his sense of historic determinism, and the spiritual desolation at the heart of bourgeois materialism. In yoking these two ideological frameworks together, Mishra has effected a thematic translation which crosses time, space, culture and language. The echoes between the two texts, set up by Mishra and inviting direct comparison, rob Samar of agency and his story of individuality. They render banal his observations and his feelings. Consider one of the most celebrated passages in *A Sentimental Education* which occurs after the tragic, ironic death of the noble Dussardier at the hands of one of their friends, Sénécal. Flaubert begins the next passage, which covers some sixteen years, thus:

He travelled.

He came to know the melancholy of the steamboat, the cold awakening in the tent, the tedium of landscapes and ruins, the bitterness of interrupted friendships.

He returned.

He went into society, and he had other loves. But the ever-present memory of the first made them insipid; and besides, the violence of desire, the very flower of feeling, had gone. His intellectual ambitions had dwindled. Years went by; and he endured the idleness of his mind and the inertia of his heart.⁷⁸

Compare this with the passage which begins the third section of Samar's memoir, intended as an exalted coda to his doomed love affair, following a crushing letter he receives from his estranged lover. Samar begins this section with a disquisition on the notion of maya, or illusion, and the impossibility of grasping this when one is absorbed by very individual 'ways of experiencing pain and happiness' and one's 'private griefs'. Then he talks of embarking on travels around the country: 'In some sense, I travelled everywhere and nowhere. The miles clocked up, and there came a point when I could no longer distinguish between the settlements clattering randomly past my jaded eyes'. Then, 'In the weeks that followed my departure from

78 Flaubert, *A Sentimental Education*, op.cit., p. 455

Pondicherry, I came to know all too well the plangent cry of the speeding train in the night...⁷⁹

In this passage too Mishra yokes the notion of aimless, unspecified travels with a kind of emotional exhaustion, a spiritual numbness, and even lifts directly Flaubert's construction, ('I came to know⁸⁰ ...'), the poignancy of Samar's thoughts made ridiculous by their echoing of a book to which specific reference is made within the text of his memoir itself: that is to say, we know that *A Sentimental Education* is within Samar's frame of reference (as opposed to just the author's). The irony may well be intentional on the part of Samar, since the ironic echo is inscribed in the text itself which the older Samar 'writes' (as opposed to the ironic echoes inherent in parallel novelistic events which lie within the sole control of Mishra as author); in this case, perhaps, the perpetrator of the irony against young Samar is not only Mishra, but the older Samar himself. But from the outset Mishra intends for the irony inherent in the echoes between this and the precursor text to be at young Samar's expense, as evident in his first encounter with this text:

I had bought a second-hand 1950s edition of it for twenty rupees from a pavement seller in Allahabad. The name of the first owner...[was] still legible on the flyleaf, and from the pages, when I opened them, fluttered out press rose petals.⁸¹

And so Samar's experiences are in a sense 'second-hand', as are the emotions and youthful hopes for which the dried rose petals are a hackneyed signifier, in keeping with the precursor text's satirising of these.

The principal act of translation inscribed within *The Romantics* is Mishra's own translation of *A Sentimental Education*, that is, his interpretation of the novel. But I would contend that Mishra's interpretation of the book is inseparable from the circumstances of his original encounter with it, as documented in his autobiographical essay, and explored in *The Romantics*. In fact the essay, for readers who have encountered it before reading the novel, echoes through *The Romantics*. The primary

79 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., p. 215

80 'Famously towards the end, Flaubert's narrative both leaps across, and illuminates, a void of sixteen years with just some poetically precise sentences carefully placed at the beginning of a chapter.' (Mishra, Untitled, op.cit.)

81 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., p. 48

act of translation informing *The Romantics* is not simply Mishra's interpretation of *A Sentimental Education*, but the translation of his original encounter with this text into personal myth, and his subsequent translation of this personal myth into fiction.

2. *Translating Experience: 'Benares: Learning to Read'*

In *Literary Symbiosis*⁸², David Cowart's collection of essays on what he calls 'symbionts' – literary texts whose form and/or content has been explicitly shaped by that of another literary text – Cowart considers the phenomenon of *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel which has inspired many such symbionts. Cowart (quoting Ian Watt) attributes its powerful draw as a 'host' text to its status 'as a new myth', which offers writers the opportunity to refract its 'powerfully suggestive meditation on character, economic theory, political and spiritual destiny, and anthropology...in terms appropriate to their times.'⁸³ In doing so, they cast a retrospective light on the equivalent themes in the precursor text itself. The reconfiguring of the original text in the light of the new text charts or reflects changes in what Foucault calls the epistémé – the climate of perception within a culture at a particular historical moment. Foucault, says Spivak, 'diagnoses an age in terms of... the self-defined structure of its knowing.' In other words, not what we think is so (a *Weltanschauung* or 'world picture') but how we know it. Each of the symbiotic texts examined here comments on Defoe's epistémé at the same time that it articulates its own.⁸⁴

To explore the parallels and resonances which exist between the two novels, the points of departure and concatenations, is to shed light on Mishra's interrogation of his personal myth and his unpicking of the historical moment. In 'Benares: Learning to Read', Mishra has fashioned lived experience into personal myth; the myth arising in the space between the details of Mishra's encounter with *A Sentimental Education*, the personal resonances of this text for him, and the gloss that he has retrospectively applied to this encounter in the light of how it has come to figure in his personal narrative as a writer. This myth has served as a device through which Mishra has been able to chart his own epistémé, in much the same way that Coetzee, Tournier and countless others were able to do via their rewritings of

82 Cowart, David, *Literary Symbiosis: The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Writing*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993)

83 Ibid., p. 149

84 Ibid., p. 151

Robinson Crusoe. *The Romantics* functions as the charting of Mishra's epistemé; the text of *A Sentimental Education* itself, one of the tools with which he has effected this charting⁸⁵. I would like to consider this idea in my examination of the relationship between *The Romantics* and *A Sentimental Education*, but first I will examine more closely how and why Mishra has mythologised the encounter which forms the basis of his first novel.

(i) *Translating Experience Into Myth*

In his essay, 'Benares: Learning to Read', Mishra gives an account of the four months he spent in Benares as a twenty-year-old man, following completion of his degree in the late 1980s. During this time, Mishra avoided thoughts of finding work or thinking about a career and spent his time reading – mainly Western literature, criticism and philosophy – in the University's library, where he made the acquaintance of a student and fellow Brahmin, Rajesh, an active participant in student politics who withheld from Mishra the shadier details of his activities. During their brief friendship, Mishra lent Rajesh a book, *A Sentimental Education*, along with a copy of Edmund Wilson's essay on the novel. Mishra later discovered that Rajesh, via Wilson's essay, was able to understand the novel in a way he himself had failed to.

These are the details, then, of Mishra's encounter with *A Sentimental Education*. In his essay, Mishra mythologises this experience. He does this through his poetic style and his heightened, elegiac tone, but also, through his characterisation of Rajesh and his younger self, and the city of Benares itself. From the essay's opening lines, Mishra establishes a dreamy, haunted tone, portraying Benares as an ancient and timeless city poised unknowingly on the verge of total effacement:

The house where I lived and the melancholy presence of Panditji and his wife were part of the world of old Benares that was still intact in the late 1980s, and

85 In Perec's *Things: A Story of the Sixties* he focuses on a moment in post-war France when a generation found itself caught in the cross-currents of rapid social mobility, a consumer boom, and left-wing, anti-governmental activism. By titling his novel, 'A Story of the Sixties', Perec makes explicit his aim to tell the story of a generation, just as Flaubert intended his own novel to be 'the moral history, or rather the sentimental history, of the men of my generation'. Frédéric's unfocused ambitions, ultimately a desire for material wealth and status, is all too true of Perec's protagonists. So arguably, Perec's novel owes more to *A Sentimental Education* than he admits to in the interview where he specified the three ways in which he 'used' Flaubert: in his depiction of Sylvie and Jerome's unfocused desires, their being drawn into political activities to which they are only nominally committed, and their fetishisation of material wealth and social status, Perec evokes Frédéric Moreau and his generation. Perec sought to chart his generation's epistemé, using *A Sentimental Education*.

of which the chess games in the alleys, the all-night concerts in temples, the dancing girls at elaborately formal weddings, the gently decadent pleasures of betel leaves and opium, formed an essential component. In less than two years, most of this solid-seeming world was to vanish into thin air.⁸⁶

Mishra does present hard historical and political background information to contextualise the events he lived through. But this is introduced only after the essay's mood has taken hold of the reader: the haunting images of a disappearing Benares, and the story of Rajesh and Mishra's intangible connection, seem to float on the surface of the essay's factual matter. What is also established from the outset, and what is maintained throughout the essay, is the sense of the young Mishra as unformed, a *tabula rasa*. He arrives in the city 'with no clear idea of my future, or indeed much of anything else'. This sets up young Mishra, a Hindu in 'the holiest city of the Hindus'⁸⁷, as a lost soul in need of spiritual enlightenment. Mishra does in fact go on to describe himself as just that, making reference to his devotion at the time to Edmund Wilson ('I had found my own Guru'⁸⁸), but implicit in the essay also is the idea of Mishra as unwitting disciple to Rajesh.

If not immediately recognisable as a guru, Rajesh is certainly presented as an archetype of another sort: the attractive, Romantic 'outsider' figure. Rajesh is good-looking, moody, unpredictable, intelligent and clearly not afraid of violence. He is mysterious too: information about Rajesh is only ever gleaned indirectly – details of his shocking childhood come from Rajesh's mother, for example, while the truth about his criminal activities is relayed by a mutual acquaintance. Rajesh is also given to gnomic utterances: "“Yes I am a Brahmin, too,” Rajesh would say, and then add, mysteriously, “but I have done things no Brahmin would ever have done.””⁸⁹ But the withholding of information is only part of Rajesh's mystery for Mishra. There is also his 'mystical side', and one incident in particular which explicitly seems to configure him as a guru-figure:

I once saw him standing on the ghats gesturing towards the sandy expanses

86 Mishra, 'Prologue: Benares: Learning to Read,' op.cit., p. 3

87 Ibid., p. 3

88 Ibid., p. 5

89 Ibid., p. 15

across the river. ‘That,’ he was saying to his companion, a slightly terrified young student, ‘is sunyata, the void. And this’ – he pointed at the teeming conglomeration of temples and houses behind us – ‘is maya, illusion. Do you know what our task is? Our task is to live somewhere in between.’⁹⁰

But Rajesh’s mysteriousness lies principally in young Mishra being too callow to fully understand the full import of what his more worldly friend says or does at the time of their acquaintance: in true Guru/disciple fashion, the lesson is learnt only once the disciple has parted ways with the guru, and achieved a level of maturity sufficient to understanding his teachings. And so, long after Mishra leaves Benares, the trip he is taken on by Rajesh to the poor, rural village of his childhood now assumes the flavour of a quest: ‘I at last saw that there had been a purpose behind Rajesh’s invitation to his home, his decision to reveal so frankly his life to me.’⁹¹ Similarly, Mishra’s understanding of Rajesh’s ‘cryptic remarks’ made on the train home is reached only after he has lost contact with Rajesh, now drawn completely into the underworld. When Mishra comes across the copy of Wilson’s essay on the novel which he lent to Rajesh, and which Rajesh has underlined, he realises that ‘he wanted me to know that not only had he read the novel; he had drawn, with Wilson’s help, his own conclusions from it.’⁹²

It is clear that Mishra could have characterised Rajesh in this essay as confused, fearful and damaged, and certainly, these elements are present in Mishra’s portrayal. But Mishra privileges a representation of Rajesh as mystic and mysterious, as privy to a deeper, hard-won understanding of the world. In other words, the older, wiser Mishra chooses to depict Rajesh exactly as young Mishra saw him, at the time of their knowing one another. This drift between temporal modes – writing about the past, from the perspective of the past, with the insight of the present – characterises too Mishra’s representation of Benares. The city is presented as one whose centuries-old way of life will soon vanish: it is only with the perspective of hindsight that this disappearance can be deemed inevitable, and yet Mishra somehow attributes an awareness of this fate to his youthful self, certainly, young Mishra’s view of the city

90 Ibid., p. 13

91 Ibid., p. 26

92 Ibid., p. 26

seems to be inflected by this sense of doom⁹³. In writing up this experience from a young man's perspective, while filtering it through his older self's sensibility – aesthetic, intellectual and moral – Mishra succeeds in mythologising the experience.

(ii) Self-mythology and the writer's autobiographical narrative

I came to this examination of Mishra's self-mythologisation in 'Benares: Learning to Read' via a broader discussion about translation as a metaphor for Mishra's process in writing *The Romantics*. But interrogating the issue of self-mythologisation brings us back to my earlier discussion of the writer and literary tradition. Mishra mythologises this experience because it is part of his personal narrative about becoming a writer. This encounter has become, one might say, part of his creation myth. In Chapter One, I touched on the idea of self-mythology as a writerly response to a problematised relationship with literary tradition. I made specific reference to V.S. Naipaul, whose widely acknowledged self-mythologisation in his autobiographical essays, as Margery Sabin says, 'repeatedly represents Writing (apart from any particular subject) as having constituted the solution to his problem of postcolonial identity'⁹⁴. Sabin makes this point in a discussion of Mishra's work, pointing out that although Mishra is clearly influenced by Naipaul, his own non-fiction avoids precisely this kind of overt self-mythologisation – it is not 'focused on personal malaise' in the same way. But Sabin makes a clear distinction between Mishra's journalism and his 'memoir'. In this distinction is the implication that the memoir itself does share the focus of Naipaul's autobiographical non-fiction on 'personal malaise'. And it is certainly true that 'Benares: Learning to Read' clearly presents a moment of crisis in the young Mishra's sense of Brahmin identity, his sense of his place in the world, and his corresponding relationship with literary tradition. But I would contend that other less apparently personal aspects of Mishra's non-fiction, specifically essays and reviews of other Indian writers, demonstrate a similar preoccupation with writerly identity and literary tradition which seem to be inflected by this 'personal malaise'. My concern here is to establish a link between what I see as Mishra's deep-rooted sense of cultural

93 Cf. Margery Sabin's comments on Mishra's review of R.K. Narayan: 'As often in Naipaul's writing, the modal auxiliary—"would have been"—shifts Mishra's narration of the past into meditative speculation, creating bonds between past and present in a history that becomes a continuing, ongoing story.' Sabin, Margery, *Dissenters and Mavericks: Writings about India in English 1765-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 178. Mishra, Pankaj, 'The Great Narayan', Retrieved May 2009, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2001/feb/22/the-great-narayan/?pagination=false>

94 Sabin, op.cit., p. 106

insecurity as a nascent writer, and the act of translation he effected on *A Sentimental Education*. I believe what links the two is Mishra's need to find a literary tradition of his own. As Sabin writes of Mishra's review of *Letters Between a Father and Son*, Seepersad Naipaul impresses Mishra for his own extraordinary self-creation, "[He] was a] self-taught man, reading and writing in isolation...He was struggling to keep afloat most of his life, struggling to define himself, acquire self-hood and culture..."⁹⁵ Sabin also cites Mishra's focus on the young V.S. Naipaul's intellectual insecurity on arriving in the metropole:

Mishra's review recognizes in the letters...the student Naipaul's "fear and panic and helplessness" at sensing only a "raw unmade self" within, utterly inadequate to the confident, world, apparently serene sensibility he was identifying as the necessary style of the writer's self in this first encounter with Imperial Britain.⁹⁶

Similarly, in 'an appreciative retrospective review of the novelist R K Narayan', Mishra 'lingers over the same challenge of self-creation through the process of developing an English-language style.'⁹⁷ Sabin points out that since Naryan was 'less given than Naipaul to autobiographical narrative', Mishra is obliged to make an imaginative leap in reconstructing Narayan's particular difficulties, which he does as follows:

the hurdles on [Narayan's] way would have been immense: disadvantages unique to writers from limited societies, who work without a received tradition, who are the first of their kind. These writers have to overcome their intellectual upbringing before they can learn to look directly at their world and find a voice that matches their experience. The disdain for one's own language and literature taught at school and college; the forced initiation into a foreign language; the groping for knowledge through an abstract maze of other cultures and worlds – these are things that can make for a lifetime of confusions and ambivalence.⁹⁸

95 Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 177

96 Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 177

97 *Ibid.*, p. 178

98 Cited in *Ibid.*, 178

In both reviews then, Mishra's sense of identification with both men and their struggles with literary tradition and writerly identity seems to go beyond that of general empathy, and is inflected with something more personal. Consider Mishra's youthful devotion to Edmund Wilson, drawing together issues already touched upon in the memoir:

I felt I couldn't explain to him [Rajesh] the circumstance in which Wilson had become an attractive and important figure for me: my semi-colonial education, which had led me to spend more time than was necessary on minor Victorian and Edwardian writers; my own confused self-education, which had seem me randomly read books without grasping the concrete social and historical backgrounds they had emerged from.⁹⁹

And implied here is young Mishra's sense of confusion regarding the social and historical background¹⁰⁰ from which he, as a nascent writer, was emerging. Mishra's mythologisation of the Benares experience, then, is part of a project which culminates in *The Romantics*, to retrospectively resolve that confusion; to configure it as part of his personal narrative of becoming a writer.

(iii) *'Why are you Indians reading these Americans?'*

To be an Indian writing in English is to be a translator of another kind. In his essay, 'Writing Translation: The strange case of the Indian English novel', G J V Prasad¹⁰¹ cites Raja Rao on the creation of a literary tradition: Rao states that

"[W]e cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians" Thus Rao posits a struggle for space, between colonial English and the native Indian languages. The act of writing in English is not 'merely' one of translation of an Indian text into the English language, but a quest for a space which is created by translation and assimilation and hence transformation of all three – the Indian text, context and the English language.

99 Mishra, *Temptations of the West*, op.cit., p. 17

100 See my earlier reference to Jill Didur's article.

101 Prasad, G.J.V., 'Writing Translation: The strange case of the Indian English novel', in Baker, op.cit, p. 42

Mishra's translation of *A Sentimental Education* is an attempt to create 'space' for himself as a writer, one in which he might establish his own literary practice and construct his own writerly identity and tradition. In *The Romantics*, Samar's discussion about Edmund Wilson with a French friend of Catherine's is ended quite abruptly when she demands to know, 'Why are you Indians reading these Americans?'¹⁰². And why, we could ask, is this twentieth-century Indian reading this nineteenth-century French man, and why, by extension, is Mishra 'translating' a French text? The established practice of postcolonial rewritings generally involve precursor texts of direct political and cultural significance to the writer, their response to these texts a way of engaging head-on with the colonial legacy which has inflected their education or development as a writer: Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, is famously her response to the anger she felt as a child on behalf of the Creole Berthe in *Jane Eyre* – demonised and denied a voice by her English tormentors – refracted through Rhys' own difficult Rhys experiences as a colonial in England. Similarly, Rushdie's use of Dickens and Austen, his reclamation of them as 'Indian writers', is also a direct challenge to the cultural hegemony, albeit a more playful and less antagonistic one than Rhys'. Mishra's engagement with *A Sentimental Education*, however, while clearly personal, lacks the same sense of a direct confrontation with cultural hegemony which characterises many such postcolonial rewritings of canonical texts handed down by the metropole. After all, the precursor text is a French classic, even though it is an English language translation. And while the French did have a colonial presence in India, young Mishra's experience of this was very much a British one. Consider the 'semicolonial education', which obliged him to pay undue attention 'minor Victorian and Edwardian writers'¹⁰³ as opposed to major Indian ones. Bereft of a literary culture, Mishra talks of how as a young man he 'read randomly, whatever I could find, and with the furious intensity of a small-town boy to whom books are the sole means of communicating with, and understanding, the larger world.' Or perhaps in the randomness of his reading the young Mishra is seeking to deny or work against the very notion of a syllabus, or canon? It was through Edmund Wilson that Mishra found a guide to the world of literature, and through it, a way in the world. In Wilson too, he found a model. The ignorant French woman who shuts

102 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit., p92

103 Mishra, 'Benares: Learning to Read', op.cit, p. 42

down Samar's attempts at discussion says of Wilson, 'You know, you must never trust an American on these matters. What do they know about European literature? Nothing.'¹⁰⁴ It is against this idea of intellectual boundaries, of restriction, the idea that certain subjects are out of bounds, that *The Romantics* takes a stand.

(iv) *Cosmopolitan Postcolonialism: creating a new tradition*

I want to return to the term 'transcreation' mentioned in my discussion of Indian translation practice earlier. This is a term used also by the Brazilian poet and translator Haroldo de Campos to define creative translations¹⁰⁵ produced in the spirit of 'the cannibalist movement', his interpretation of a theory for the development of a postcolonial Brazilian culture based on the metaphor of cannibalism. The tenets of this movement were first set out by Oswaldo de Andrade in his 1928 *Anthropophagy Manifesto*, for which the translator Edwin Gentzler, in his essay, 'Translation, Postcolonial Studies, and the Americas' gives the following context:

The term itself derives from the cannibalistic acts of the Tupi Indians, the indigenous tribe first met by the Portuguese, French, and Spanish explorers. The Tupi practice, however, was by no means "heathenistic" or irreligious in any way. Despite the way it has been characterised by Western explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists, it was highly religious, and in many ways akin to the Christian practice of communion with its symbolic drinking of the blood of Christ. For the Tupi Indians, cannibalism had nothing to do with the European notion, which involves concepts of devouring, dismembering, and mutilation, but rather an act of taking back out of love, honour, and nourishment.¹⁰⁶

The cannibalist movement argued for a similar 'loving' appropriation of all that was of value in Western culture in order to enrich and nourish indigenous Brazilian culture and to move away from the traditionally deferential dialogic position between first world and third world cultures. Gentzler refutes criticism of the cannibalist

104 Mishra, *The Romantics*, op.cit, p. 92

105 He also used such neologisms as 'transtextualization', 'poetic reorchestration' and 'reimagination'.

106 Gentzler Edwin, 'Translation, Postcolonial Studies, and the Americas', Retrieved July 2009
arts.brunel.ac.uk/gate/entertext/2_2_pdfs/gentzler.pdf

movement:

What is unique about the anthropophagist translators is that rather than convert to European values and ideas, or merely to juxtapose indigenous ideas with European ones, they use the European ideas in an emancipatory fashion in the creation of new cultural identities, ones not separated from but embedded in multiple cultural traditions. Through this process of selecting the best of another culture, adapting and consuming it, and then making it one's own, in short through a process of transculturalisation similar to the anthropophagist's, Brazilians may be better suited to adapt to the new world order than other cultures caught up in more traditional First World/Third World relations.¹⁰⁷

I would argue that Mishra's use of *A Sentimental Education*, and also his use of Wilson's writing on it is a comparable act of cannibalism, and one born of his desire to create a tradition for himself. In his 1951 lecture, 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', Jorge Luis Borges asks:

What is Argentine tradition? I believe that this question poses no problem and can easily be answered. I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have.¹⁰⁸

Sergio Waisman examines this lecture in his study of the writer's intertwined writing, reading and translating practice. Contextualising this within a historical overview of Argentinean literary tradition, he cites Frances Aparicio:

The act of translation, in Spanish America, can be posited as a metaphor for the search for a national literature, in which authors read and transform foreign text into their own literary creations, according to each of their individual impressions.¹⁰⁹

107 Ibid.

108 Waisman, op.cit, p.125-6

109 Ibid., p. 20

Waisman goes on to present Borges' arguments for a new Argentinean literary tradition based on an irreverent stance towards the whole of Western literary culture, enacted through the practice of translation, or 'creative infidelities and recontextualization':

As Borges's texts constantly illustrate, translation – whether we mean translation proper or other processes of writing as translation – need not have the negative connotations of a practice that leads to derivative, inferior versions. Rather, translation can become a process through which innovation is possible. And innovation from the periphery, because of the periphery's condition of marginality, represents a literary and political challenge to the center, to traditional views on influence and originality, and to pre-established determinations of aesthetic value and canon formation.¹¹⁰

Waisman, commenting on Borges' lecture, goes on to cite his comparison of the Argentinean position with that of Jewish and Irish writers who are also, 'at once apart from and a part of the center, which gives them much potential freedom and mobility'.

Like Borges' South America, India has arguably never been so much a part of 'the center' (or the West), as it is today: through its contribution to the global digital economy, through the proliferation of internationally acclaimed writers of Indian origin (Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, *et al.*) and the success of a kind of Bollywood culture repackaged for Western consumption (see, for example, the box office hit, *Slumdog Millionaire*). And despite the West's growing intimacy with religious and political tensions, with poverty, disease, and environmental disaster – features that have always characterised the West's view of parts of the developing world, like India and South America, India still remains apart from 'the centre'. This tension between 'apartness' and 'a part-ness' experienced by the postcolonial writer through his or her engagement with both a global literary culture and local concerns, is addressed by Margery Sabin. She characterises Mishra's response as his 'cosmopolitan postcolonialism', arguably what Borges himself is urging Argentinean writers to embrace in his lecture. Mishra's use of *A Sentimental Education* and

110 Ibid., p. 126

Edmund Wilson's writing in *The Romantics* mark him as a cosmopolitan postcolonial, choosing to engage from the margins not just with the British colonial legacy but with Western sites of power: Mishra characterises Samar's interlocutor in the debate about Wilson, as a French woman, and Americans are presented as the worst examples of colonial ignorance in this novel (see Debbie and her comments about García Márquez). Sabin presents Mishra's self-invention as a cosmopolitan postcolonial as successful:

he has already gone far to fulfill Seepersad Naipaul's optimism that the Indian writer in English can successfully create for himself a style to match experience. Mishra's writing in every genre brings him as an author and India as a subject within an international modern prose tradition where the writerly activities of self-creation and social analysis are intimately fused.¹¹¹

This notion of 'self-creation' is at the very heart of my wider discussion about the writer and the notion of a personal literary tradition. A will to self-creation is evident in *The Romantics*, both in the autobiographical self-mythologising enacted within it, and in the creation of a literary practice in Mishra's use of translation. To conclude, *The Romantics* may well be a translation of *A Sentimental Education*, or a transcreation, or, to follow the innovative nomenclature of de Campos, who termed his translation of Goethe's *Faust* a 'transluciferation', we might even call it a 'trans-sentimentalisation' or some other neologism. But above all, in endeavouring to put into practice what Mishra has learnt from his 'guru' Wilson, that is, to consider the broader social, historical and political context of a narrative – in this case, Mishra's own personal narrative of his time in Benares – Mishra's novel is primarily an acknowledgment of his debt to Wilson then, and ultimately, an act of cannibalistic love.

111 Sabin, op.cit., p.189

Chapter Three

I have shown how Mishra used *A Sentimental Education* to examine both a personal myth – the story of his first encounter with Flaubert’s novel – and the political and cultural context in which it occurred. My ‘translation’ of *Paul et Virginie* in *Genie and Paul* closely follows Mishra’s model. *Genie and Paul* is, like *The Romantics*, an exploration of questions raised by a significant event in my life. Like the story of Mishra’s literary encounter, this event has assumed mythic resonance in my personal narrative due to the political, social and cultural moment at which it occurred. And like Mishra, I have used a text central to my own writerly creation myth in the process of fictionalising both the event and its significance for me.

To understand, and as far as possible, to define the relationship between the *Genie and Paul* and *Paul et Virginie* is to articulate the underlying processes by which I came to use the original text to write my novel, making the shift from an instinctive process to a conscious one. My aim in developing greater awareness of my writing practice is to enable further development of it, and greater control of the processes which underpin it.

The extent to which I have translated *Paul et Virginie* has developed over the course of my project. In early drafts of *Genie and Paul*, my references to it were little more than a signifier of the characters’ Mauritian heritage (their names, for example); apart from this, its presence in *Genie and Paul* was only subtextual. However, as my themes developed and my use of *Paul et Virginie* became more sophisticated, becoming embedded in the novel’s genetic code, its presence in the text became more explicit. Finally, having analysed Mishra’s use of *A Sentimental Education* in *The Romantics* for the purposes of this critical commentary, I decided to follow Mishra’s example and inscribe my precursor text within the narrative. In other words, I decided to name it, and to give it a physical presence as a book within my own novel. My aim here is to elaborate on the significance of this, and how this impacts on the resulting relationship between the two texts. But first I will present an account of the event on which *Genie and Paul* is based, and the context in which it occurred.

1. 1995: The personal and the political

In 1995, I took an Ecstasy tablet at a club. Five hours later, I was taken into intensive

care. I had been hospitalised with water intoxication¹¹². In many ways this personal event seemed to crystallise for me a particular kind of cultural, political and social cynicism which I saw as characterising both recent events in British history, and my direct experiences of these. What happened to me, I felt, could only have happened at this particular time.

By 1995 the rave scene was dead. Formed in 1987, its roots were in gatherings of like-minded people brought together by a mutual love of dance music and the drug which defined the scene. But the scene's growing popularity and the potential profits to be made from it led to the corporatisation of the scene in the form of club raves, and in the emergence of 'superclubs' like Ministry of Sound, where I took that pill.

Superclub raves were characterised by a kind of capitalist cynicism antithetical to the hedonistic and altruistic spirit of the original scene. Ecstasy was illegal and the club advertised its zero tolerance policy. And yet, the club was decorated with polystyrene replicas of pills and was clearly full of people on drugs. The management, making relatively little money at such events from the sale of alcohol (clubbers on Ecstasy tend to eschew it) had launched their own brand of water. To maximise sales of this, the taps in the toilets had been turned off.¹¹³

Politically, this era seemed infected by that same cynical spirit. We'd seen the first Gulf War take place in 1991, a war which I and many of my peers believed to be motivated by self-interest (control of Middle Eastern oil supplies) rather than the humanitarian and ideological reasons stated by the UK government. Our passionate hatred of the Conservatives had been appropriated: while we'd opposed Thatcher and everything she stood for, we found ourselves confused by her replacement, John Major, who appeared not to stand for anything in particular. The fairytale marriage of Charles and Diana had been exposed as a sham, and with this revelation came the public's growing realisation of the extent to which the Royal family had manipulated the media (and by extension, the public themselves) in order to maintain the fiction of their moral authority. And then, there was the Stephen Lawrence case.

112 It is possible to 'drown' internally from ingesting more water than your body is capable of expelling naturally, resulting in a dilution of the electrolytes - trace elements - which regulate bodily functions. A serious water-electrolyte imbalance can result in death. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6263029.stm>.

113 This was one of the things which saved my life: having spent all the money I'd brought with me on this own brand bottled water and unable to refill my bottle in the Ladies', I asked a member of the barstaff for some from tap water. She refused. Had she been kinder, I would have drunk as much as she was prepared to give me and would certainly have arrived at the hospital in much worse shape than I did.

I was not a habitual user of Ecstasy. I remember having a bad feeling about taking that pill, just after I had swallowed it. I think now that this was just part of the bad feeling I and a lot of my friends had about everything at the time: jobs, prospects, the woeful state of our country, the moral cynicism of our government, and its clear disregard for us, its young people¹¹⁴. When I came to write *Genie and Paul*, I used this autobiographical experience as a catalyst for the novel's narrative and an exploration of those times. It was not just me that felt poisoned.

2. *Genie and Paul: from the personal to the political*

Genie and Paul is in part the story of a man's failed search for a home in the world, and how this relates to his insecure sense of cultural identity. It is also the story of his inability to manage the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Paul's fragile sense of self disintegrates under the increasing pressure he feels with each year he fails to join his peers in the adult world. Finally, he suffers a breakdown. In counterpoint to this is the story of his sister Genie's search for him, both within her memories and in the city she had always considered home until Paul disappeared from it, and from her life.

The novel is an attempt to explore what I have come to see now as my own transition from adolescence to adulthood. Inherent in this transition was the issue of self-definition and attendant questions of cultural identity: the extent to which I identified myself as British and a Londoner at a time when I was not proud to consider myself either, and the role of my Mauritian heritage in this sense of self. These questions, I felt, were interlinked with the event I outline above and my understanding of its political, social and cultural context: if I did not believe in those in power, what did I believe in? What did that make me? Both event and context inform the plot of the novel, and my characterisation of Paul, a member of my own generation. But I am not Paul, and *Genie and Paul* is a novel, not a memoir. My aim, then, was to draw on my own experience to explore the themes and questions which troubled or intrigued me about that time, and to produce something beautiful and

114 The Government's response to the large numbers of recent graduates who failed to find work in the recession (I was one), was also cynical and self-serving: we were forced onto 'training courses' so that our numbers would not inflate the already high unemployment figures. Such courses (which chiefly consisted of advice on how to dress for interviews, and how to format a CV - information which could have been more cheaply and efficiently disseminated in a leaflet), were followed by obligatory three month placements where we worked full-time for the paltry sum of £10 extra a week on top of our dole money, often without the prospect of a real job at the end of it. We were being exploited and we knew it.

meaningful from this. I decided that allusions to the keystone text in my personal canon, *Paul et Virginie* itself troubling and intriguing, and beautiful and meaningful – might help me to achieve this.

But as I engaged more deeply with the political, social and cultural context which informed the novel's genesis and Paul's backstory, I realised that what had underpinned the zeitgeist of cynicism I identified was an overt privileging of money and power over the human. When I considered this truth in the context of my novel, and its key themes of cultural identity and notions of 'home', I realised that given Paul's Mauritian heritage and its role in his conflicted sense of self, I could not avoid addressing directly the theme of colonialism and its after-effects in my novel. This was itself a political project which privileged money and power over the human. I would therefore need to adapt the evolving narrative of *Genie and Paul* accordingly (this theme which eventually superseded my focus on the political and sociological context of the story). I soon realised that further development of the postcolonial theme in my novel would impact on the extent to which *Paul et Virginie*, a novel set in colonial Mauritius.

3. Paul et Virginie: *A brief overview*

Paul et Virginie was published in 1788, a year before the French Revolution, and was set in Mauritius some forty years before that. Until 1810, Mauritius was still a French colony, known as Île de France. The novel is fable-like in style and is told as a framed narrative. A young man out walking on the island encounters two ruined cottages. He asks an old man passing by to tell him about these. The old man, who knew the inhabitants, tells him the story of Paul and Virginie, the young boy and girl raised there as brother and sister by their respective mothers. Both women were outcasts from French high society living in isolation from other colonials on the island, and together with their children, they formed a self-sufficient community, attended by two faithful slaves, Domingue and Marie. The children were raised as innocents in an exotic rural idyll, free from the corruption of so-called civilised society, but their lives end in tragedy when Virginie leaves their community for the metropole and its pernicious influences¹¹⁵.

115 Paul and Virginia grew up to be morally irreproachable, simple and kind. They were devoted to one another, and, on reaching puberty, fell in love just as their mothers had hoped. But their idyll was destroyed when Virginie was sent to France to be educated at the command of a rich old aunt, who had persuaded the island's governor to her cause. Virginie pined for her

The book has not aged well. It is pious, sentimental, histrionic and improbable. And, in places, morally repugnant: despite the equitable nature of the community, the superior social rank of Virginie's mother to Paul's is consistently signified by the reference to her as 'Madame de la Tour', while Paul's mother is known familiarly as 'Marguerite'. This difference in rank is further flagged by their respective backstories and how they came to live outside society: Madame de la Tour has shunned it as her noble family shunned her for marrying a commoner, while Marguerite was herself shunned for conceiving a child out of wedlock. So Madame de la Tour is a victim of prejudice, while Marguerite has only herself to blame for her fate. Then there is the issue of slavery. It is acceptable to have slaves, it seems, if they are treated well.

But it seems churlish to apply contemporary mores to a novel so old. There is, after all, much to admire about it: its precise and beautiful descriptions of the landscape and plants of Mauritius (Bernardin, an admirer of Rousseau's, was already a celebrated botanist and had visited the island in 1768) and the Socratic dialogues between the old man and Paul, particularly on the nature of solitude. There are also moments of genuine pathos, despite the novel's cloying sentimentality. Flaubert, who found much to dislike about the book, readily admitted to being moved to tears by Virginie's letter home to her mother.¹¹⁶

One reason why Flaubert, who famously hated the masses, might have been circumspect about the book was its immense popularity: the novel was 'an instant bestseller of great popular appeal'. The fable-like story, and the immediate resonance it had with readers of all backgrounds, accorded it the status of myth.

Myths inspire rewritings¹¹⁷. In Chapter Two I discussed how the myth of Robinson Crusoe has appealed to successive generations of writers, who have used this story to interrogate their respective epistemes with regard to the notions of

family and her island, and wrote home of her repugnance for French society. Paul too was distraught at the separation. He would often visit the old man to discuss great questions about God and man, love, society and happiness – questions that had never troubled him before his present desperation.

Then, to Paul's joy, news was received that Virginie was on her way back to them by ship. But it was the cyclone season. The ship was caught in a storm and tragically, Virginie drowned, having refused through modesty to divest herself of the heavy garments she was wearing. Cruelly, the shipwreck happened in sight of the coast and of Paul, who had to be restrained from diving into the rough sea to save Virginie. Within three months of her death, Paul and both their mothers died of heartbreak, survived only by their two slaves, Domingue and Marie.

116 Cited in Showalter, E., 'Un Coeur Simple as an Ironic Reply to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre', *French Review* 1966 XL 1 47-55, p. 49

117 It inspired a number of other works, including Flaubert's 'Un Coeur simple'.

‘character, economic theory, political and spiritual destiny, and anthropology’ presented in the original story. *Paul et Virginie* appealed to me in this same way, allowing me to explore its themes (innocence and corruption, our relationship to the natural environment, ‘civilised’ life and solitude, and the nature of happiness), in the context of postcolonial Mauritius and in the life of a London-born British Mauritian. I felt that to integrate elements of this novel into my work would offer great creative possibilities: there was much literary capital to be made in setting up or highlighting resonances between the two texts, and the significance of *Paul et Virginie* in my own writerly ‘creation myth’ only increased its attraction to me as a palimpsest over which my novel would be imposed. What follows is a more detailed examination of the relationship between my novel, and Bernardin’s.

4. *Paul et Virginie* and *Genie and Paul*

In his analysis of Flaubert’s use of *Paul et Virginie* in *Un Coeur simple*, Nicholas Cronk points out the narrative parallels between the two texts:

The names of Mme Aubain’s children, Paul and Virginie, are explicit pointers to a wide range of implicit allusions: the families in both works live in isolation and are dominated by two women of different social standing; and both works have significant motifs in common: departure by ship; departure to the convent; separation leading to death; a backdrop of sea and storms; and so forth.¹¹⁸

Many of these parallels apply to my own novel too: the brother and sister in *Genie and Paul* are named after Bernardin’s protagonists, and the ‘significant motifs’ mentioned here also feature in my novel. When one text explicitly invokes another, the reader sees significance in parallels between the two, becoming aware of any implicit allusions. But there is significance also in obvious divergences and inversions of elements from the precursor text. My protagonists do not live in rural Mauritius, but a deprived area of inner London; Bernardin’s Paul is responsible and hard-working while my Paul is jobless and feckless. In many ways, such divergences are more arresting than like-for-like parallels, which are, after all, only to be expected in a novel which clearly signals its textual dependence on another. But what is intended by divergence or inversion?

In *Genie and Paul*, there are instances of this at all levels of the text, not just at

118 Cronk, Nicholas, ‘Reading *Un Coeur simple*: The Pleasure of the Intertext’, in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 1995, vol. 24, pp. 154-61, p. 156

the level of the narrative: temporally, culturally and linguistically my novel inverts Bernardin's. To put it another way, I have rewritten, or 'translated' a French novel into English, relocating it from rural eighteenth-century colonial Mauritius to twenty-first century¹¹⁹ inner London forty five years after Mauritian independence.

But my intention here in translating the novel in this way is not satire: as with Flaubert's *Un Coeur simple*, *Genie and Paul* is 'certainly not a step by step refutation of *Paul et Virginie*, and such an attempt... would surely have produced a lifeless work.'¹²⁰ So, if my Paul lacks his namesake's moral strength and nobility of character, he lacks also the original Paul's sense of home, emotional security and a clear idea of what is expected of him. My intention was not to make a mockery of the virtuous original, although that may well be a secondary effect of my characterisation.

The reason for this apparent 'writing against' lies in my cultural position regarding the text and its location: *Paul et Virginie* was written by a Frenchman living in the metropole when Mauritius was under French rule; I was writing as the London-born daughter of Mauritian immigrants (born British colonial subjects), post-independence. Not only is my rewriting of *Paul et Virginie* necessarily informed by my position, but it is this – among other things – which I was seeking to explore in my novel.

So these divergences and inversions have been configured to form a narrative strategy in my translation of *Paul et Virginie*.

5. Translating Paul et Virginie

I will focus here on a discussion of three major aspects of my translation of *Paul et Virginie*: (i) structure, style and voice (ii) character and narrative and (iii) themes. The manner in which I have translated these architectural elements have, to an extent, determined the strategies I have employed for the translation of other, more minor aspects of the original text.

(i) Structure, style and voice

I will consider these elements in parallel because I believe they are interlinked, and

119 Setting the novel in 2003, thereby placing Paul in his early thirties (since he was to be the same generation as me), would highlight the impact of the transition years between adolescence and maturity, and his failure to move beyond them. This date also allowed me to write the devastation of Cyclone Kalunde into the narrative and the symbolic architecture of the novel.

120 Showalter, op.cit., p. 49

key to them is Bernadin's use of the fable form¹²¹ in which to present his story. The fable form impacts on *Paul et Virginie*'s mode of narration, the structure of the novel, and the style of writing: directness and simplicity being defining characteristics of the form, and a reason for *Paul et Virginie*'s immediate resonance and enduring appeal. These qualities are also consistent with the novel's moral universe: the privileging of the modest, the simple and the natural, over the pretentious, the sophisticated and the artificial.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, *Paul et Virginie* is a framed narrative, told to a stranger by an old man who was both friend to the protagonists and witness to their fates. This mode of narration as Bernadin employs it does not allow for sophisticated insight into the protagonists' psychologies, which is consistent with Bernadin's characterisation of Paul and Virginie as humble and devout. It is consistent also with their lack of agency: these characters are without wealth or status, and so without power. Their fates are beyond their own control. So Virginie must obey the summons to Paris by wealthy a aunt; the wreck of the ship and Virginie's drowning are due to the notorious cyclone season, and her aunt's spiteful insistence that she travel during this period. The sense of predestination is established by the presentation of this story as a 'tale foretold': the old man prefaces his narration of it with the observation that it is a sad one, and is moved to tell it by a question about the two ruined cottages where the characters once lived – themselves a clear signifier that the story does not end happily.

I wanted to present a more ambiguous moral universe in *Genie and Paul*. And one of the themes I wanted to explore was the notion of responsibility and autonomy in defining one's own character, fate and identity. So, for example, Genie, who shares Paul's childhood experiences pragmatically identifies herself as a Londoner, thereby avoiding the trauma and self-doubt engendered by Paul's conflicted sense of cultural identity.

For these reasons I decided against transposing the figure of the narrator into my own novel, since it would not allow for the detailed exploration of my protagonists' respective consciousnesses and sense of cultural identity, nor allow for a

121 I'd like to make a distinction here between my use of the words 'myth' and 'fable' in reference to *Paul et Virginie*. A fable is what Bernadin set out to write, and as such refers to the story's simple form and direct style, and its morally instructive or didactic element. 'Myth' refers to the canonical status this fable has achieved over the intervening centuries, and its subsequent resonance in the collective consciousness.

sufficiently complex presentation of their psychologies, necessary for understanding the characters' roles within their own fates and for foregrounding the dramatic events which subsequently unfold as a result of these, for example, Paul's flight from London and his resulting breakdown.

However, my intention in writing *Genie and Paul* was not to write a straightforward realist novel, since I wanted also to imbue it with some of the freshness, resonance and power inherent in the fable form and in *Paul et Virginie* specifically. But clearly this form would not allow for the complexity necessary for a full representation of my two protagonists, and the exploration of my themes.

I decided a close third-person narrative would best allow me to achieve both the necessary level of psychological insight and a fabulist dimension: the narrative mode, at key points, could be shifted from close third-person to an overtly omniscient, guided narration reminiscent of the old man's direct storytelling where necessary. For example, in the opening paragraph of the novel the register is very much that of a storyteller's, with a symbolic parallel being drawn between Cyclone Kalunde and the emotional devastation wreaked by Genie's hospitalisation. However, once the setting for the novel has been established, the narration shifts to close third-person, presenting what follows from Genie's point-of-view.

Within the present-tense narration are embedded self-contained stories told by peripheral characters in the first person. These stories are characterised by the directness and simplicity of the fable, particularly in their distillation and dramatisation of the novel's themes (colonialism, loss of innocence, nature versus civilization, notions of home and identity, and so on). These share a mode of narration more akin to the old man's in *Paul et Virginie*.

One challenge I faced in my aim to present the characters' psychological complexity was in handling their backstories. In order to foreground present-day events and the subsequent responses and actions of the protagonists, I felt it necessary to show the characters' childhood experiences, and to give details of relevant events from their recent pasts. However, I wanted the present-day narrative relating to Paul's flight from home and Genie's search for him to retain its sense of urgency and momentum.

For this reason, I decided to present these episodes from the past in a separate narrative strand, braided with the present, in order to avoid over-reliance on the use of

flashback, which would have over-burdened the present-day narrative.¹²² This would also have presented too prescriptive a foreshadowing of present-day events: readers would have fewer choices about what to infer from these incidents, as these would necessarily be framed by specific events in the present-tense narrative which had somehow triggered the flashback.

By depicting past events in stand-alone chapters, I could present relevant episodes from Genie and Paul's childhoods as self-contained stories, leaving it to the reader to infer what significance these shed on the present. The narration of these past events could also take on the quality of the fable, as the mode of narration here could be direct and simple and impressionistic, the focus not on a realist rendering of the texture of the past, but on key symbols, such as the little prayer-book which gets spoilt in Genie's story, or the coulevre (with its overtones of the snake in Eden) in Paul's. The separate present-tense narrative also allows for a greater sense of urgency, and a more direct narrative trajectory, as well as perhaps a sense of the fatalism or pre-destination which imbues the original.

Offering past-tense chapters as a separate narrative thread has allowed space for some resonance between present-tense action and the past. However, in combination, these three strands – the present-tense narrative, selected events from the characters' past, and stand-alone stories – cumulatively produced the sense of thematic and psychological complexity and subtlety which a straightforward fable form could not allow. The final section comprises two chapters from Genie and Paul's respective points of view, effecting a kind of textual reuniting of the characters, though they are never to be reunited in the narrative. Structurally and stylistically, then, I have effected a reimagining of the original.

(ii) Characterisation and narrative

Of all the elements of the original novel, it is with Bernardin's characters that I have the most ambiguous relationship, and this is reflected in my characterisation of Paul and Genie. Bernardin's characters reflect the archetypal and ideal virtues of their sex in the age that it was written: Paul is strong, noble and brave, while Virginie is demure, patient and tender-hearted. Such gender stereotyping is not to modern tastes but contemporary readers might well make concessions for this, given the novel's

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Thanks are due to my supervisor Andrew Cowan for this suggestion.

historical context. However, as a typically uncompromising adolescent, these archaic notions of masculinity and femininity antagonised me, and a residue of this has informed my characterisation of *Genie and Paul*.

There is evidence of satire in my translation process here. The motives translating the characters of Virginie and Paul as I have done range from the technical (characterising Paul in such a way that allowed me to effect an exploration of my key themes through his persona) to the playful – having always been slightly appalled by Virginie’s improbable virtue and passive femininity, I took pleasure in characterising Genie as sexually precocious and more assertive than her weak brother. But my characterisation was primarily shaped by the novel’s themes, and how these characters might allow me to most effectively explore these.

My aim in this novel was to explore conflicted cultural identity, specifically within first-generation British Mauritians, like myself. I decided to configure Paul rather than Genie as the character with the fragile sense of self for two reasons: (a) ironic resonances with his more self-assured namesake would create a kind of tension or friction within his character, further contributing to the representation of Paul Lallan as someone under increasing psychological and emotional pressure; (b) in order to suggest a post-feminist crisis of masculinity as part of Paul’s general conflicted sense of identity, and thereby to enable exploration of notions of masculinity in a postcolonial context in Mauritius.

To highlight Paul’s mental fragility, I chose to characterise Genie – who broadly shares his cultural background, although technically, she is more Mauritian than he is – as more emotionally secure, mature and self-sufficient. This lends Genie a strength of character and robustness at odds with her namesake’s personality, again creating a dissonance between the original character and my reimagining of her. In this instance, however, I feel the dissonance reads as playful and irreverent, since I have shifted the character’s register from vulnerable and victimised to strong and fearless; while Genie does experience some momentary destabilisation in the aftermath of Paul’s flight from home, she quickly regains her equilibrium and sets out to search for him in Mauritius.

In effect, then, I have inverted the dynamic between the original characters: in my novel it is Genie who is bold, courageous and headstrong and Paul who is emotionally vulnerable and cut off from home, as Virginie is when sent to stay with her aunt in France. This inversion is reflected in the title of my book.

It is not just in their respective temperaments that I have effected inversions, but in their role in narrative events too. I have chosen to discuss narrative in connection with characterisation because the two are interdependent in my novel: events are driven by the characters and characterisation is effected through the characters' actions and responses to the situations in which they find themselves.

There are narrative parallels between Genie's character and Virginie's – both are sent away to convent schools for example, although these are significantly different experiences – but there are echoes also between Paul Lallan's story and Virginie's¹²³: This sort of cross-pollination in my characterisation (that is, Paul Lallan's echoing of Virginie's fate in *Paul et Virginie*) adds an element of suspense too: if Paul in *Genie and Paul* follows a similar narrative trajectory to Virginie's in *Paul et Virginie*, does this mean he will also share her fate¹²⁴? And if so, given the inversions and adaptations this writer has effected on the original storyline so far, how will this fate be reconfigured in the rewriting?

Lastly, a note about the relationship between my two main characters. Since it was not my intention to write a romantic love story (I wanted the focus to remain on Paul as an individual, and his crisis of cultural identity), I decided to characterise Paul and Genie as half-brother and sister, rather than two children who do not share parentage, thus removing the expectations of romantic – or at least, sexual – love between the two characters¹²⁵.

123 Virginie is sent away from the protection of her rural idyll and exposed to the dangers of society Paris, while Paul leaves the squalors and moral corruption of inner-city London for rural Mauritius and Rodrigues. Similarly, when Paul returns to London from Mauritius after Jean-Marie's death, he brings with him seeds of Mauritian plants as a gift to Mam. This directly invokes Virginie's letter to her family while in France, and her gift to Paul of seeds from French meadow flowers. My translations of iconic episodes from the original (that is, the kind that would merit the kind of engraved plate Genie liked so much as a child) are inflected with irony: Virginie accompanying the runaway slave girl on her return to a cruel master is the inspiration for the scene in '*Genie and Paul*' where Paul and Genie find a dog in the street and return him to his owner. This story was intended as a satirical comment on the attitude towards slavery in the original.

124 Paul does indeed share Virginie's fate: his suicide by drowning, a decision taken under some misguided sense of nobility and self-sacrifice, echoes Virginie's: in choosing not to take off her heavy garments when about to fall into the sea, Virginie too commits suicide in an act of perverse moral integrity.

125 It would be disingenuous to think I might have removed wholesale these expectations from the readers' minds since an awareness of the hypotext's narrative would suggest to readers that this romance may still be a possibility. However, I intended these expectations to be diffused by clearly signaling the protagonists' clear romantic involvements with other characters in the book.

(iii) Themes

While these have naturally been inflected by the cultural, geographical and linguistic translation I have effected on the novel, I have also adapted them in more specific ways to suit my project. So it is, for example, with the key theme of innocence and corruption.

The innocence of the rural idyll where Paul and Virginie grow up is presented as a counterpoint to the corruption of French society which their neighbour, the old man, abhorred so much that he preferred to live as a hermit in the colonies. In the discussion on structure above, I refer to the issue of agency in Bernardin's characterisation of *Paul et Virginie*, that is, their lack of agency. 'Innocence and corruption' carries with it just these same fatalistic notions of passivity: one is innocent, until corrupted by an external agent. In *Genie and Paul*, I wanted to explore this theme through Paul, but by translating this as 'idealism and cynicism' I was able to convey the notion of choice: idealism is something one can choose to maintain, but if one fails, one becomes cynical.

Earlier in the chapter, I describe Paul's failure to reach emotional maturity. I felt that this should be linked to a kind of pathologically soured idealism: a traumatic event in adolescence should somehow corrupt his adolescent self's sense of natural justice, and engender in him a fatal kind of cynicism. But despite Paul's loss of idealism over the years, he has never allowed himself to become cynical about Mauritius. In this case, his idealism might be seen as artificially maintained – a form of self-deception, which in the end, is fatal.

I have also amplified in translation a theme which is only touched upon briefly in the original, namely colonialism. In fact, while this is a topic in *Paul et Virginie*, I would argue that it is not a major theme of Bernardin's novel: he does not explore colonialism as an issue in any depth, nor derive any metaphorical capital from its presence in the narrative. Colonialism, in so far as it features in the original, exists as a means of showing how the evils of so-called civilisation will manifest themselves in all societies, however nascent, and that the only strategy for avoiding this is to isolate oneself, just as Marguerite, Mme de la Tour, and the hermit narrator do.

One way to strengthen this theme was to make it resonate throughout the book, and not just in Genie and Paul's narrative. One example of how I did this relates to Maja's story. The traumatic event Paul experiences in adolescence (see my comments on characterisation) is the murder of his beloved half-brother Jean-Marie,

by the troubled Maja, himself a great friend of Jean-Marie's. I could further expand upon the novel's central themes and implicate colonialism and its human cost in the tragedy by giving specific context to Maja's mental state, writing him as a displaced Chagossian, the victim of cynical political manoeuvring on the part of the British and Mauritian Governments. Similarly, I dealt with this theme quite directly in other of the self-contained stories which punctuate the narrative: in Mam's story (life in Mauritius post-independence) and, in a metaphorical sense, in Gaetan's story of how the subculture of surfing was 'colonised' in Mauritius by those richer and more powerful than Gaetan and his friends¹²⁶. These three stories can be seen as ironic paradise narratives, which play off the original depiction of Paul and Virginie's rural (and colonial) idyll – quite obviously in Maja's description of the pre-lapsarian idyll from which he and his people are so cruelly ejected.

In amplifying this topic and giving it resonance as a theme, I have strengthened too its links with those other themes to which the topic was tangentially linked in the original: 'solitude and society'; 'man's relationship with the natural environment' and even 'innocence and corruption' (or 'idealism and cynicism'). This in turn adds a further layer of resonance to the theme and its function in my narrative.

6. Paul et Virginie in Genie and Paul

But the most transgressive act of translation effected in my rewriting of *Paul et Virginie* is my inscription of this novel as an object within the narrative of *Genie and Paul*: an analysis of the structural, narrative and thematic interplay between the two texts should acknowledge the physical presence of the precursor text within mine, and its presence too as something like a myth in the protagonists' collective consciousness. So the presence of *Paul et Virginie* in *Genie and Paul* is both subtextual – the story of *Paul et Virginie* informs the narrative – and textual, in that *Paul et Virginie* exists at the level of the narrative as a story that the characters are aware of, and a physical object with which the characters interact.

As an object the book of *Paul et Virginie* serves a number of functions. It functions as a symbol: Paul's sense of self and cultural identity are disintegrating, as is his grasp on the book (he accidentally loses pages and leaves one behind at Gaetan's), while conversely, Genie has 'helped' the book along in its disintegration

126 See my comments on capitalism and youth cultures, and the rave scene.

(wanting to release the pictures she likes so much). There is something liberating, subversive and creative about Genie ‘destroying’ this iconic book in her own way and in the context of her narrative, this symbolises Genie’s unbound sense of cultural identity; the autonomy she enjoys in constituting this to suit herself.

The book functions as a narrative device also: it allows Mam to start talking to the boy who will become Paul’s father, and it is responsible for alerting Mam and Genie to Paul’s whereabouts (when Gaetan returns the loose page to Paul). Its presence as a part of the characters’ consciousness (the fact that they ‘know’ the story too) acts as a structuring device, allowing for a retelling of the story by Genie to Sol, and therefore the reader. Genie’s retelling presents a sort of narrative foreshadowing: the reader can choose to note parallels made between *Genie and Paul* and the story Genie tells.

And of course this retelling allows me to ‘educate’ the reader; since *Paul et Virginie* is not a commonly known book to English-language readers, Genie’s account of the story helps to present the concept of ‘retelling’, or rewriting, as a theme, and more explicitly, helps to provide readers with sufficient background to maximise the impact of resonances between my text and the original. An assessment of Flaubert’s use of *Paul et Virginie* in *Un Coeur simple* sheds some light on my own rewriting. I believe that the relationship which exists between this story and Bernardin’s novel parallels the relationship between his book and my own.

In recent years, critics have rediscovered in Flaubert’s *Un Coeur simple* not only a rewriting of *Paul et Virginie* but also of its companion tale, Bernardin’s *La Chaumière indienne*, which has now disappeared from the canon. Flaubert’s allusions to this were implicit, since the story was widely known to his readers¹²⁷. But I have been required to make *Genie and Paul* ‘massively and explicitly pamlipsestous’ as *Paul et Virginie* is not widely known to English readers.

In his analysis of Flaubert’s rewriting of *Paul et Virginie*, English Showalter argues for a more nuanced reading of *Un Coeur simple* than has previously been allowed for, seeing the story as Flaubert’s response to Bernardin’s whole ethical project, and not simply a satire of *Paul et Virginie*, as was thought after *La Chaumière indienne* dropped from the canon and awareness of Flaubert’s references to it were lost. In *Un Coeur simple* Flaubert takes Bernardin’s philosophy of spiritual goodness

127 ‘*La Chaumière indienne* was obviously well known to Flaubert, and, more to the point, it was very well known to the first readers of *Un Coeur simple*.’ Showalter, op.cit., 49

and happiness and pushes it to an extreme: ‘Almost anyone would be happy in the idyllic situations where Bernardin places his pariah [the protagonist of *La Chaumière indienne* and a model for Félicité] and Paul and Virginie, but only a truly simple heart could be happy in the situation where Flaubert puts Félicité.’¹²⁸

Nicholas Cronk in his study of the story considers the function of Flaubert’s allusions to both *Paul et Virginie* and *La Chaumière indienne* beyond the level of simple intertextual play: ‘What is interesting here is not Flaubert’s treatment of Bernardin as a “source” but his appropriation of Bernardin as a means to prod and manipulate the reader, a strategy which is only possible because Flaubert could be certain that his readers could not fail to recognize the allusions to (among other works...) *Paul et Virginie* and *La Chaumière indienne*.’¹²⁹

I will claim a similar strategy in my rewriting of *Paul et Virginie*, and would position *Genie and Paul* also as an ‘ironic response’ to the novel, rather than an ironic refutation of it. My novel is a yearning for the happiness, goodness and simplicity of spirit Bernardin elevates as ideals in his novel: a yearning precipitated by the spiritual aridity of the times in which I came of age. I have personified this yearning through the character of Paul, and it is symbolised for him by Mauritius.

I have described Mishra’s rewriting of *A Sentimental Education* as a cannibalistic act of love (after Haroldo de Campos’ essay), and I would say the same is true of my text in a very literal way: my book has ‘swallowed’ *Paul et Virginie*, and, in a literary act of post-mortem, bits of the original in various stages of digestion may be observed in the reading of *Genie and Paul*.¹³⁰ When I consider this visceral, love/hate relationship between my own novel and *Paul et Virginie*, I must return to the contention presented at the beginning of this discussion: that the key relationship here is between *Paul et Virginie* and myself.

I prefaced this commentary by presenting it as a kind of post-rationalisation: most of the thinking (conscious or otherwise), around the novel had been done before I began work on this commentary. However, subsequent redrafts of the novel have occurred in parallel with my critical work, so that my conscious thinking about the process has in fact informed part of the writing of the novel. In short, I have inscribed

128 Ibid., p. 55

129 Cronk, op.cit, p. 156

130 This runs counter to the kind of cannibalistic cynicism I identified as characterising the death of the rave scene: capitalism will swallow whole and appropriate, amoeba-like, whatever sits outside it.

my relationship with the text – as I have discerned it during my work on this commentary – within the novel itself. At the beginning of this chapter I restated my intentions regarding the formulation of a theory about my practice, and how this process might help me to develop my practice further. In the next chapter, which concludes this commentary, I will consider the ways in which my work on both the novel, and this commentary, have impacted on my practice and its development.

Conclusion

In *Palimpsests*, Gérard Genette's 1982 survey of the many ways in which literary texts 'visibly, massively and explicitly' invoke others, Genette categorises intertextual practices as either a transformation or indirect transformation ('imitation') of the original text. In defining 'transformation' in this context, Genette states that one might 'transform' a text by 'a simple and mechanical gesture... (an extreme example would consist in tearing off a few pages – a case of reductive transformation).'¹³¹ This reconfiguring of textual destruction as an act of creativity has informed the writing of *Genie and Paul* and is summed up to a degree by my choice of epigram for the novel, a quote from Robert Walser: 'the novel I am constantly writing is always the same one, and it might be described as a variously sliced-up or torn-apart book of myself.'¹³² This quote reflects too, something of the spirit of my endeavour in this commentary, which is to triangulate my writerly identity, the relationship of that identity to my Ur-text, and the process of writing as informed by that text. Walser talks of constantly writing the same book, but that is not my intention. In fact, my aim in writing this commentary is to move on from this 'book of myself'. I do not want to write the same book again and again. The act of tearing up a book suggests the notion of starting again. So now that I have torn up *Paul et Virginie*, where do I go? How are the other elements of my writerly equation – identity and process – affected once this 'torn-apart book' has been dispensed with?

What remains after *Paul et Virginie* is removed is, of course, an absence in my equation. It is an absence that led me to write back to *Paul et Virginie* in the first place – that is, the absence of a literary tradition. In Chapter One, I discussed my encounter with Dhondy's *Come to Mecca* and how it awoke my racial consciousness – the many ways in one which could be other than white in Seventies London – whilst simultaneously alerting me to the absence of my own story from both this text, and,

131 Genette, Gerard, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Claude Doubinsky, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 5, 6 & 7. Genette labels this practice of specific invocation 'hypertextuality', and defines it as 'any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.' p. 5. I consulted this study during my research for this commentary, but ultimately found his definitions of the hypertextual practice of 'translation' too narrow to be useful to me here.

132 Robert Walser, 'Eine Art Erzählung,' (quoted in the preface to *The Walk*, foreword by Susan Sontag, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992)

subsequently, the other books I encountered as a young person. When I became a writer as well as a reader, I felt this lack of representation as the absence of a literary tradition. In Chapter One I discussed how my sense of myself as a ‘translated being’ inflected my initial engagement with literary tradition. I’d like to consider the notion of absence in my practice at a more fundamental level. This will require further autobiographical context, specifically, my relationship to language.

Until the age of five, I spoke no English, only Mauritian Creole. Concerned about my educational and social development, my parents quickly resolved to stop speaking Creole to me, and English became what could be called my primary language. I use the word ‘primary’ here instead of ‘first’, as Creole was technically my first language. And my mother tongue too, since it was the language my mother was naturally inclined to use with me. I quickly forgot how to speak Creole, though I could understand it fluently. And so it became the language of adults for me, since it was spoken only by the adults around me. It was the language they would speak in if they wanted to discuss adult matters (they did not realise how much of it I understood): it came to seem natural to me, then, that as a child I could not speak it, but I fully expected to be able to speak it once I was an adult myself. This didn’t happen. I never got my Creole back. In her introduction to *Lives in Translation: Bilingual writers on identity and creativity*, Isabelle de Courtivon, claims:

One can be inhabited by bilingualism even if one does not speak two languages fluently but writes from the absence of what should have been. For sometimes, after the loss of an early language, the music nevertheless remains alive en creux, leading one to write as on a palimpsest, in one tongue but always over the body and sound of a buried language, a hidden language, a language whose ghosts reverberate in words...¹³³

I would argue that *Paul et Virginie* gave voice – or words – to that ghost, allowing me to articulate the questions and dilemmas and absences pertaining to a lost language, a half-developed Mauritian identity and, the absence of a literary tradition. In retrospect, the fact of my writerly engagement with *Paul et Virginie* feels inevitable – a way to contend with these issues; to recover my Creole.

133 Courtivon, Isabelle de, ‘Introduction,’ in *Lives in Translation: Bilingual writers on identity and creativity*, Isabelle de Courtivon ed., (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009)

‘In retrospect’ summarises the long process of reflection I have undertaken in writing this commentary. This has led me to understand that I have configured the absence at the heart of my cultural identity, and my strategy for dealing with this, as textual: I have negotiated a missing language, and a missing literary tradition via an appropriated text. Having become conscious of this instinctive process, I am in a position to invert this reactionary dynamic: instead of reacting to a text based on a perceived sense of absence, I am now empowered to seek out texts with which I might engage, in order to negotiate the absence of my Ur-text and the other absences which shadow it.

This retrospective assessment or post-rationalisation has been conducted in parallel with an ongoing development of my writing practice beyond *Genie and Paul*. I think it would be useful to offer here an example of one recent project which illustrates how I have gone on to engage with other texts in my work. One very literal example of this is my contribution to a writer colleague’s novel, Luke Williams’ *The Echo Chamber*.

I met my good friend and first reader, Luke on the MA in Creative Writing at UEA. Luke had just begun writing *The Echo Chamber*. So as our friendship grew, I came to know the book and its protagonist as well as I did the writer and his ambitions for his novel. Luke had always intended that his first-person protagonist, Evie, would tell the story of her first love affair through the transcription of entries from her lover’s diary. Luke wanted to enact the process of Evie’s transcription – the physical act of it – in his own writing of the book, so wanted another writer to produce these diary entries. He suggested I do it. I agreed, with the proviso that other than the basic details about plot and character already provided in the synopsis submitted to the publishers¹³⁴ – the lover is a 20-year-old mime artist called Damaris who meets Evie in Edinburgh in 1972, and together they travel the US – I could write whatever I liked. Luke bravely and generously agreed. I see my contribution to the novel as a creative engagement with its themes, its protagonist and its narrative structure, as well as with the writer’s ambitions for these¹³⁵. But fundamentally, this contribution is an engagement with another text. And within this text I have created a

134 *The Echo Chamber* will be published by Hamish Hamilton in the UK and Penguin Vintage in the US in April 2011.

135 For example, a key theme in the novel is performativity, and the notion of character or personality as a construct. In 1972, the rock musician and trained mime David Bowie, famous for his creation of alter egos, toured the US with his Ziggy Stardust show.

space in which to write.

Which brings me back to absence. My work on this commentary has enabled me to interrogate this notion, and its suggestion of a lack or inadequacy. And indeed, that is how I felt as a novice writer. But now, with a fuller understanding of my own practice and its roots, I can reconfigure the absence which first motivated me to write as space: an arena for exploration, or a licence to create, rather than a disadvantage. To illustrate this distinction between absence and space, consider Perec's autobiographical novel, *A Man Asleep*.¹³⁶ In his biography of Perec, David Bellos (also Perec's English translator) describes the writer's ambitions for his novel as follows: 'he...resolved to write a book that would fill the space between Proust and Melville – a space occupied in part by I L Peretz's 'Bontsha the Silent' and by Kafka....'¹³⁷ Perec is famously a writer who felt at the heart of his identity an absence; one which haunted him and undoubtedly contributed to the severe depression he suffered as a young man. This experience formed the basis of *A Man Asleep*. But in the writing of it – in the transformation of this temporary absence from life into a work of fiction – Perec reconfigures this absence as 'space': that is, he turns a position of powerlessness into one of autonomy and agency. He does this in two ways: firstly, in the act of picking up a pen and writing, a decisive act in contrast to the state of existential somnambulism about which he was writing; and secondly, by identifying a matrix of other similar fictions of 'absence', and creating a space for his work where these intersected: his disengaged protagonist stands alongside Proust's sleeping narrator, Melville's passive clerk, and Peretz's perpetual victim who lives and dies without any desires. And so what is first perceived or experienced as absence, or a lack, can be reconceived as an area to be explored or the space in which to create, or exist. And informing this reconfiguration is an engagement with the concept of power. So Proust's bedridden narrator accesses a rich inner life of memory, *Bartleby's* passivity ultimately renders him indomitable and Peretz's humble soul makes such a simple demand in the face of the abundance offered to him that he confounds the whole of heaven.

The absence at the core of my cultural identity, my sense of invisibility,

136 Perec, George, *Things: A Story of the Sixties and A Man Asleep*, Bellos, David, trans., (London: The Harvill Press, 1999)

137 Bellos, David, *Georges Perec: a life in words*, (London: Harvill Press, 1999), p. 360

instigated a sense of powerlessness in me: I began to write in part to overcome that feeling. But in the writing of *Genie and Paul* a conceptual shift occurred in my practice: I moved from writing from a place of invisibility, silence, absence and powerlessness, as these pertained to my insecure sense of cultural identity, to writing about these as themes. This is evident most explicitly in my development of the characters of Mam, Gaetan and Maja, previously only functionaries of the plot. In the final redraft of my novel I gave them each a voice, allowing them to tell their respective stories: stories relating to these themes. And I inscribed this sense of agency within the novel too, by presenting these stories within the interstices of the main narrative, thereby creating a space for them.

I will be developing this notion of interstitial narrative space and its potential for interrogating the discourses of power further in my next project, a collaboration with Luke Williams. This book aims to tell the story of the Chagossian people and their forced displacement in the 1960s under the aegis of the British Government, in order to facilitate the leasing of the largest of their islands, Diego Garcia, to the US Government as a military base. In relating this story we aim to use texts relating to the forced depopulation and its aftermath: official documents, found text, medical records, interviews and so on. The structuring of these documents into some kind of matrix will allow the silences and absences contained within them, and between them, to become spaces within which stories might flourish. To return to Bellos on Perec, and the latter's use of intertextual techniques in *A Man Asleep*:

Perec's main innovation was to to write an autobiographical novel in which almost every sentence had been written before by someone else... *A Man Asleep* is not a counterfeit or a copy: it is rather a collage-book, or a cento, on a grand scale:

'For me [writes Perec] collage is like a grid, a promise and a condition of discovery [...]. It is the will to place oneself in a lineage that takes all of past writing into account. In that way, you bring your personal library to life, you reactivate your literary reserves.'¹³⁸

I believe Perec's approach here is a potential model for this project and for my wider

138 Bellos, op.cit., p. 346

practice: his use of intertextual collage in the autobiographical might be usefully adapted to the geopolitical. Instead of bringing a 'personal library' to life, we might activate the 'literary reserves' inherent in the documents relating to the Chagos islanders' story. And what might we then discover?

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Volume 2: *Genie and Paul*: A Novel

Genie

(i) The Cyclone

In the early hours of Saturday the 8th of March in the year 2003, Intense Tropical Cyclone Kalunde peaked to a Category 5 somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean, south east of the island of Diego Garcia, reaching sustained winds of a hundred and forty miles per hour. And at around that time, some two thousand miles away in the middle of London, twenty-five year old housing administrator Genie Lallan was rushed into hospital.

While Genie lay unconscious in intensive care, Kalunde travelled eastwards, sideswiping Rodrigues – little sister island of Mauritius, which narrowly escaped – wreaking destruction but claiming no lives, before veering southwards four days later toward the colder latitudes of the southern Indian Ocean, and oblivion.

At which point Genie Lallan, still in London and still in hospital, opened her eyes.

This was not the first time Genie had woken up without knowing where she was. Or even the first time she'd woken up in hospital (indeed being born was a waking up of sorts). But it was the first time she'd died and come back to life again. She'd only died *technically*. You could say the same about her resurrection. Mam took photos of her hooked to the wires and drips and some of the fat pipe forcing breath down her throat: a mechanical umbilical cord. Mam took photos to show Paul, Genie's big brother, who was with her the night she'd almost died and had not been seen since.

Genie was discharged and taken back to Mam's. Her room was the same it had always been. The walls that same colour. A flaky pink like dried calamine lotion – no, like the pink of something else which she could not quite recall, Genie thought as she resurfaced between naps – with picked-off scabs where there had once been posters. Perhaps she ought to paint them again. That fresh honeymoon smell. Genie, hazy from medication, turned her attention to a picture on the wall by her bed. A plate she'd taken from an old book. *Paul et Virginie*. A book with engravings she'd liked so much as a kid she'd surreptitiously bent back the spine to precipitate its gradual falling apart. She studied its crosshatchings minutely for the rest of the afternoon, in between sleep, until Mam came in with a tray.

Genie squeezed lemon into her bowl of chicken noodle soup. Its velvety steam swabbed her nostrils. When Mam drew the curtains, the sunlight was sharp and watery like the soup. She told Genie about the cyclone; that everyone in Mauritius was fine, but that Rodrigues was devastated. Absolutely devastated.

Genie thought, *Shellshocked. Crying. In bits*. She asked if Paul had come home yet.

Don't worry about *him*. He's just lying low. Like he does. Are you going to eat that soup or just blow on it?

The picture was called *Crossing the Torrent*. Against a background of black mountains, a muscular youth stripped to the waist, trousers rolled up to his knees, was standing on a rock in the middle of a swollen river, poised to continue his treacherous crossing. A girl, slightly younger, on his back, clinging to him, arms around his neck, had her face half-buried in his hair. On the riverbank were banana trees whose broad serrated leaves flapped in the wind: the same wind which was whipping the river into a frenzy of white froth; the same wind which had unfurled the girl's hair from the scarf she had used to tie it back. The girl looked afraid but the boy, smiling up at her, looked happy to be carrying this load, which seemed to give him the strength to carry on.

On her bed were the same sheets she'd had as a child. Deep-sea divers in old-style diving bells waded heavily through a faded sea, parting weeds to find chests spilling treasure. When Genie first started her periods, she'd bled on them and the stains had looked like rusted coins. She hadn't seen these sheets in a while, she realised, as she manoeuvred herself out of bed. It was the same bed she'd always had. She had little strength to negotiate its sagging and felt tempted to let herself be swallowed up in its peaks and troughs. Being back home again was a bit like that. But she was here only temporarily. She couldn't imagine how it must feel for Paul, who had no foreseeable way of finding anywhere else to live. After his last eviction he had told her he was done with squatting, that he no longer had the energy to make himself anew. A quote from something, Genie supposed, palm against the wall as she got to her feet. Weak as she was, she had to go to his room; she had to see for herself.

He'd not been home since that night, Mam said. But Genie knew as soon as she pushed open his door, as soon as she saw how he'd left his room. How he had *left*: drawers pulled from their sockets, gutted: shelves cleared in one swipe – all of it

gone, his deodorant, his comb. Just the basics. Prison possessions, he called them. He was not lying low at all. He'd gone.

She opened the wardrobe and sunlight slithered the length of its mirror and fingered the wire hangers inside. They'd been picked clean. Mam appeared in the doorway,

I couldn't tell you while you were in hospital.

No, said Genie, I guess you couldn't. Where is he?

But Mam said nothing, only walked to the wardrobe door and clicked it shut. Her reflection looked into Genie's.

Eh toi? she said, What are you doing out of bed? You're supposed to *rest*.

He'd taken her suitcase, Mam said. The one they'd come to London with. But she told Genie not to worry, that he would be back when he'd run out of money.

(ii) 1982

Genie was five when she first came to London from Mauritius. Paul, who was ten, had been born in London and had spent the first five years of his life there. He considered himself an authority.

That's London, Paul said, leaning across her with all his weight, pointing down at the sticky patches of light below, It looks like God's been gobbing.

Mam would normally have snapped at him for that *malpropté*, but she seemed not to be aware of anything around her. When the plane began to buck and shudder in anticipation of its landing, Mam seemed equally apprehensive, leaning further back into her seat, hands gripping the armrests, as though trying to resist the inevitable descent. They had flown for hours over an empty grey desert. It looked like the moon. When Genie pointed this out to Paul, he grabbed her head – still annoyed that she had been given the window seat, still angry that they were leaving Mauritius – and pushed her face up to the glass.

You idiot, he said, that's the wing of the plane.

But Paul was not so sure of himself and his place in the world as he supposed. Genie began to realise this the day that Tonton Daniel got married.

They had come to live with Grandpère and Grandmère and their Tonton Daniel. Everything they brought back with them had fit in Mam's old suitcase, the one she'd first come to London with, before Paul was born. She kept it on top of the wardrobe in her room where it would stay until they left again, this time, for a place of their own.

Mam's was a gloomy room with only a narrow window, the curtains never drawn. It had been Grandpère's room until they arrived and it was still cluttered with his things: the back issues of *Titbits* magazine, the Teasmaid on the bedside table which Mam and Grandmère and Tonton Daniel had bought him for his birthday, but which, to their knowledge, he had never used (No wonder, Paul had said, earning himself a slap around the ear, He only drinks rum and he never has to get up for work); the boxes and bottles of old medicines which crowded the ugly putty-coloured mantelpiece and a stack of Grandpère's *Teach Yourself English* books. Paul would flick through these, sometimes reading aloud.

Hello Mrs. Baker. Is Susan there? (Paul's voice posh and mincing) Yes Roger. Please come in. Susan! Roger is here to see you! Would you like a cup of tea, Roger? Yes please Mrs Baker, you old bag. You have a very nice home. But you stink of shit. Mam's dressing table was crowded with lovely things that Genie liked to look at. Paul sneered but he seemed to like looking too, particularly at the framed photo of Mam and Genie's Dad outside the house in Mauritius. Genie would marvel at the difference in their looks. Mam's more various, the Chinese skin, Indian bones, the Creole eyes and mouth. And Papa, so dark-skinned you could barely make out his features. Once Genie asked where the photo of Paul's dad was and Paul punched her on the arm.

They lived in three rooms on the ground floor of 40, St George's Avenue, a narrow terraced house in Tufnell Park. The flat was not self-contained: to walk from one room to another involved stepping out into the corridor used by the other residents. Genie was shy of these strangers in their home, but Paul would try to engage them all in conversation – the young *Anglais* in the squirrel-coloured duffel coat who lived right at the top or the old Chinese man (*bonhomme chinois*, Grandmère called him). But these men seemed as timid as Genie was.

Their play was shaped by the movements of the other members of the household: while Daniel was at Poly or Grandmère was in the kitchen, they would play in the front room, the room where the four of them slept; if Mam was at work they played in hers. And sometimes, if Grandpère was out, they would go down to the kitchen to watch television. But Grandpère rarely went out. He sat at home all day in his chair in the kitchen, where he also slept, watching TV and drinking rum. Grandpère, they thought, was gradually flaking away. His skin was grey-brown, dusty with a light white scurf like the bloom on old chocolate. Seeing him sober made him as foreign to Genie and Paul as hearing him speak in English. When he stood up he had the grand proportions of a monument, but when he walked he staggered like a man caught in a gale. Genie and Paul were scared of him.

They spent a lot of time in the hallway. They would crunch into dust the dead leaves which had drifted in by the door, or play post office with the pile of mail for ex-tenants who had left no forwarding address. It smelt of old damp newspapers, the muddied doormat and the cold air from outside, spiked with the smell of Grandmère's cooking drifting up from the kitchen.

Sometimes, Tonton Daniel took them to the park. It was a scrubby little park, its tough grass matted with dogshit. But there were apple trees too, and the first time Tonton Daniel took them, soon after they had arrived in London, the trees were in blossom. Genie was shocked to see these thick, fistfuls of creamy, foamy blossom spilling from the branches. She felt she would explode, as though she didn't know what to do with herself, it was so beautiful. She ran up the hill and Paul followed her, clambering up into one of the trees. From where she stood, looking up at him, the sky seemed full of the stuff. Paul wrenched off handfuls and scattered crushed petals over her, laughing as they whirled about her like snowflakes. And then Paul, seeing how badly she wanted to possess these blossoms, broke off what seemed like a huge branch of it and jumped down from the tree to hand it to her.

Every morning, when the sun rose to a point where it set the orange walls on fire, Genie would leave the bed she shared with Grandmère and Paul and pad across the prickly carpet to climb in with Daniel. They would lie there staring up at the ceiling as though contemplating the night sky and her heart would rise like a balloon. They had long aimless conversations: she would ask him how thunderstorms happened, or why a chair was called a chair or what colour Paul's dad was. Paul would say, from the other side of the room,

Because it looks like a chair.

Or,

Don't you talk about my dad.

Genie was sure for a long time that Daniel was Jesus with his long hair, his odd beauty (a different configuration to Mam's: Chinese bones, Creole skin, Indian eyes - *green* eyes) and the righteous anger never directed at her but often used to protect her. As she and Daniel lay there in bed, she stroked his smooth brown skin and tugged lightly at the hairs in his armpits which were tough and silky like the fibres from the corncobs Grandmère would strip and boil for then. She asked Daniel if he would ever get married.

Oh I don't think so, he said. Maybe when I'm ninety.

She would have preferred him to say *Never* but ninety seemed quite far away.

How old are you now? she asked.

Twenty-two. It takes a long time to count from 22 to 90, he said.

And then Genie offered to marry him. Paul laughed nastily. He chucked aside the pillow and ran across the room, now barred with sunlight. He kicked Daniel's bed and told Genie she was stupid, that you couldn't marry your uncle. Daniel said, Relax, she's only little. Then Paul called Daniel a pervert. That's how it usually ended: with Paul getting angry and calling them names. And then Daniel would say something like Shut up you little shit. And then Paul would go running to Mam's room next door saying Mam! Daniel said shut up you little shit. Then they would hear Mam sigh and rise heavily out of bed and come into the room and tell Genie to go down and ask Grandmère to give her her wash.

But Daniel had lied. Three months after they had come to stay, he told them he was getting married.

It was his day off from the Poly. He took them to the park.

Let's go *popom* Daniel had said that afternoon, as he usually did, rubbing his hands, Paul screwing up his face at this babyish expression. But still he raced to pull on his shoes. They walked under the trees along St George's Avenue, the pavement wet from recent rain but still crusted here and there with stubborn little lumps of dog-shit. Swinging from Daniel's hand, Genie pointed these out to him.

How helpful, he said, Thank you Genie. You have a special doo-dar.

What are you on about? asked Paul.

A dog-do radar: *doo-dar*.

And then Daniel made a sound like a police siren: *doo-dar doo-dar* which Genie repeated on pointing out further trouble-spots. Paul pulled up the hood of his anorak and, head down, hands deep in pockets, dropped back a few paces, even though he had no friends here to witness his shame.

It was on their way back from the park, after an unscheduled stop at the sweet shop, that Daniel broke the news. Strangely, it was Paul who was most upset. It was Paul – barely able to spit out the words around his Jawbreaker – who accused Daniel of having lied to them.

A week before the wedding, Genie spotted a clutch of daffodils in a corner of the gloomy front garden, near the bins. It was the first time she had ever seen daffodils. She was shocked by their waxy brightness. We should pick them for the wedding, she told Paul. No, he said, it was a stupid idea. But later that afternoon, while she was

being fitted for the bridesmaid's dress Grandmère was making, Genie heard the front door click. She looked out to see Paul in the garden scavenging for the daffodils. She tried to run after him but Grandmère had her pinned in place.

Reste tranquil, ta.

She could do nothing but watch as Paul tugged them up, returning with an armful. He went into Mam's room. She heard Mam tell him off.

You should leave beautiful things where you find them, Mam screamed at him, They're all going to die now.

Later that afternoon, the bridesmaid's dress was finished. When Genie tried it on, Paul told her she looked like a monkey in fancy-dress.

It was the day of the wedding. Genie was given a book to carry with her posy of pink and white silk flowers. It was a small prayer-book bound in white leather with silver-edged pages. Genie thought it as precious and mysterious as a spell-book. She asked Paul to read to her from it.

I am the resurrection and the life saith the Lord: he that praiseth my farts, though he were stinky, yet shall I kick him in the arse.

Grandpère did not make it to the ceremony, but was waiting for them at the hall when they arrived for the reception. He swung Genie around and she smelt the chemical smell of the special cream he applied to his flaking skin, which made her think of their kitchen at home. This was the first time that Genie and Paul had seen him outside it. He had appointed himself barman and was serving drinks at the trestle table in the hall. They took their seats at the top table without him. The tablecloths were decorated with marguerites and asparagus ferns. Mam fussed over them to make sure they were not wilting and when Genie asked how the flowers had appeared there, Mam told her she had taken them from the garden and sewn them on herself. Paul tugged at Mam's sleeve.

But Mam. You said you should leave beautiful things where they were, or they would die.

What are you talking about? Mam snapped.

The daffodils! he cried, turning on his heels and running into the crowd of guests.

Shortly afterwards, when Mam was spooning Biryani onto Genie's plate at the buffet table, they heard a commotion at the other end of the hall. They saw Paul

running away. He had bitten off the head of the bride figurine on the wedding cake. Genie was sent after him. She found him out in the corridor, by the kitchen. There was shouting. Paul was peering through the glass, watching Grandpère slumped in a chair, long legs splayed out, with Daniel astride him, shouting into his face and gripping Grandpère's wrists to restrain his wildly flailing arms. Grandpère was trying to hit Daniel. Paul turned on his heel and ran to fire exit, where he pushed down the bar of the door, and left, slamming it shut behind him.

When Genie returned to the top table, she noticed that her little prayer book was ruined. Some champagne had been spilt on it. The leather cover was buckled and stained and some of the silver had run from the edge of the pages. Genie put her head into Mam's lap and sobbed. Mam gently pushed her aside, anxious for the silk of her new dress.

From that night on, everything was different. Daniel and Fanchette went to stay in a bedsit they had rented in Islington. Grandpère slept in Daniel's bed. Paul and Genie were supposed to have been asleep when Daniel and Fanchette's uncle brought him in. They staggered under the dead weight of him, a limp crucifix, and laid him on the bed. There was a business-like tone to Daniel's voice that Genie had not heard before.

Met li lors so cote, tenshion li touffé si li malade a soir.

Put him on his side, so that he doesn't choke if he vomits in the night.

After they had left the room, Genie began to cry quietly.

You better get used to it, Paul said.

She'd had no idea he was still awake too. Something in his voice crackled like static,

Daniel's going to Canada with her.

Later that night, through Grandpère's snores, Genie heard Paul cry. She slipped her hand into his. He did not push it away.

The day after they had seen Daniel and Fanchette off at the airport, Grandpère came into the front room.

Allez vini! Nous pou alle promner

Come on you lot, we're going out.

Grandpère had never taken them out before. They trailed behind him, apprehensive about where he could be taking them. They crossed Junction Road to

Tufnell Park tube station, descending in the lift and emerging onto the platform of the tube, which terrified Genie and seemed to her like the belly of a giant vacuum-cleaner.

They got out at Embankment and walked alongside the Thames, Paul leaning over every now and then to look down at the water while Grandpère swaggered a way in front, his long legs incapable of taking smaller steps to accommodate them. Soon they saw him stop and caught up with him. Genie thought of Grandpère's skin when she saw how the bark of the plane trees flaked away.

Look, he said. Look at that.

Grandpère was pointing to a great concrete column.

Cleopatra's Needle.

He read the plaque aloud in his stiff, heavily accented English but Genie understood little of what he was saying. She did not know who Cleopatra was. She did not know why she had left her needle here. She did not think it looked much like a needle. Genie looked at Paul but his face was turned in the opposite direction and she followed his gaze to a hot-dog stand across the road. Paul stared at it meaningfully, willing Grandpère to notice, his nose lifted to the breeze, smelling the onions.

They might have been passing en route to somewhere else but the memory ended there, on the banks of the grey-brown Thames, the water churned up by the autumn wind, with Grandpère lurching around, his arms thrown wide, laughing,

Ki commeraz cadeau! Ene cadeau fesse!

What kind of a bloody stupid gift is that?

He never took them out again. Soon afterwards, he went into hospital. The night Grandpère died, Genie and Paul lay awake in the dark for a long time. Then Genie felt a fierce little kiss planted on her cheek. It was more like a bite.

They were not afraid to go into the kitchen and watch television after that.

(iii) The Apple Tree

So far Mam had refused to discuss Paul and his ‘running away’ as she called it, claiming Genie was too weak and should not upset herself. But if she thought Genie well enough to have brought her all the way out here, to her allotment – or *potager*, as Mam preferred to call it – well enough even to travel out to the fag end of Hackney by *bus* on a weekday afternoon, to be jostled by shoppers and mothers with buggies and dogged old ladies with trollies, to sit out in the unkind light and the cold and the sour smell of river, surrounded by wasteland and towerblocks, then Genie was certainly well enough to talk about Paul.

Look at my ladies in their Easter Bonnets!

They’re called ‘daffodils’, Mam.

She was not in the mood for whimsy.

Mam was wearing one of Paul’s old T-shirts. A Smiley face in a bandana rippled over her stomach, and it was spotted with tiny holes which might have been made by maggots. Hot from digging, she stopped and leant on her spade. It was the patch where her apple tree had once stood. Mam had lost it in the great storm. She had talked about that tree ever since, imagining how big it would be. She talked about its lost future as someone might speak of a child who had died.

This reminds me of when you were tiny, Mam said. When we were in Mauritius. You used to share a bed with Paul. He hit you in his sleep and bruised your face. I wouldn’t let you play out in the street in case the neighbours thought I had been beating you.

I don’t remember any of that.

I made you stay in the garden. You and me in the garden, like this. They didn’t like me, those women.

I only remember London.

You were always a Londoner. Not like Paul. It must have confused Paul, coming back here. Once you decide to leave one country for another, you should stay, or you’ll never come to see it as home. He thought he was Mauritian by the time we left. Even though he was born here. Strange. The opposite to you!

A low-flying aeroplane bound for City airport thundered overhead. Genie followed its passage across the sky, which was white and blinding.

I’m worried about him, Mam. How did he seem to you at the hospital?

Mam stopped mid-dig and gave a grim little smile. Paul had not come to see her at the hospital. He had not even been with her when the ambulance arrived.

He *left* me?

Genie had no memory of the accident, as Mam called it. That part of the night had been edited out so that when she looked back, it cut straight from her losing Paul in the club to waking up in hospital. Mam said that he must have just left her and ran. That by the time she'd got back after seeing Genie, he'd already cleared his room.

But it was not just Paul who was missing. Half of that night had disappeared too. Genie had not been taken into hospital until 4am. It couldn't have been later than 1am when she lost him. What had happened in between? Had she in fact found Paul again? Did they argue? Had she said something to make him leave her? And no word from him since it happened, Mam continued. You could have died that night. When the hospital rang I was in shock. I couldn't believe you'd done such a stupid thing. As though you'd gone onto the motorway and stood in front of a juggernaut heading straight for you. I went there by taxi. I told myself, If the doctor comes out to see me when I ask for you at the desk, she is dead. But they took me straight through. I asked who had brought you in. They said no one. No one, Genie.

I want to speak to him. Tell him I'm OK. See if he's OK.

You have to find him first. It's been a week. Where would you start?

I could try Eloise.

Li pas meme connais ou li etait, ce l'une la.

She doesn't even know where she is, that one.

That was true. The last they'd heard, Eloise was staying at a rest home for the rich and fatigued. Mam asked about Sol. Weren't he and Paul like boyfriend and boyfriend at one time. But Paul had not mentioned him for years now. What had happened there? Genie claimed not to know. She didn't know where he was now.

His best friend! Mam said. How he can just drop people like this.

Maybe Sol dropped him.

Maybe, said Mam. But this sudden disappearing. Perhaps it's inherited.

Not from you. Must be from his dad. Whoever *he* is.

I never spoke about him because your brother never wanted to know. He thought his father didn't want to know about *him*. That's not true. Paul's father never even *knew* about him! I tried to explain that. But Paul didn't want to hear.

Tell me, said Genie.

(iv) Mam's Story

Grandmère and Grandpère came to London in 1964, before Independence. I stayed behind. I had the right to live in the UK but there was no money for my fare. Grandpère had borrowed the money from his sister to come over. She seemed to think that with this debt she owned our whole family: she worked Grandmère like a slave and even Daniel had to go round to help with chores after school and so on. After that Grandpère refused to borrow more from her. So I stayed with Tante Mars in Bambous and continued my studies. I thought that after school, I would get a job, maybe with the government. I would save the money to join Mum and Dad and Daniel. But then Independence came and suddenly it was not so easy. I used to have a recurring dream at this time. I was on the docks, waving off the boat that my family were on. It seemed to be moving away, but it didn't seem to get any smaller and it never seemed to reach the horizon. Around this time the Ilois came to live in Mauritius. People from the Chagos Islands. I heard stories of some Ilois who had come to Mauritius in the usual course of their business, but when they tried to go home they were stopped from boarding the boat. Their island had been sold to the Americans. I felt a bit left behind like that too, with my family in England and England no longer having anything to do with Mauritius. It was not just me that was left behind. The whole country was. The mother ship had cut us adrift. When I left school in 1970, there were no jobs. People getting jobs in other countries made the front pages of the newspaper. We were always hungry. I remember feeling always a bit faint. A bit dizzy. I got terrible headaches. It was a very depressing time. Very gradually, in a quiet sort of way, we were all starving. It was like we were waiting for something but nobody knew what. There was nothing to do, really. When you went to visit your friends there was nothing new to say, because nobody did anything. Nobody went anywhere. Grandpère and Grandmère would send us some money every now and then. But Grandpère was desperate to get his sister off his back so that most of his wages went to her. And we never told them how it was for us. We spent our days trying to pass the time. Just for something to do. We patched up our clothes. Went walking in the countryside looking for things to eat. We lived like this for some time. Then one day a friend wrote to me and invited me to visit, she said she had a dress she wanted to give me. So I went to visit her. She was living in Tamarin with her brother and his wife. She was looking after their baby. It was a pathetic little thing who cried all the time. After a while this

crying got on my nerves, and so did my friend: there was no dress at all. She had invited me to her house to recruit me for the political party she had just joined – the Mouvement D’Etudiants Mauricien. But mainly she just talked about the man who had founded the party. He was very charismatic, very handsome. He had studied in the UK. He had been inspired by the events of 1968 Paris to set up the party. I was suspicious of him. I don’t know why. Because he was French, I suppose. Because he had brought these foreign ideas to our island when what we needed was to find our own way. I was too listless and my friend’s hysteria was draining me. In the end I was sorry I had come all this way to see her. I told her I had to go home and asked, before I left, if I could borrow a book. In the bookcase, among old civil service textbooks in Government English on sugarcane pests, the pamphlets on education, the books of poems and essays by politicians, I found a copy of *Paul et Virginie*. I had read it a long time ago, at school. I had always liked the book. And I liked this edition, which was old. I liked the plates. My friend was very scornful. Nostalgic and sentimental bourgeois rubbish, she said, which patronises the proletariat and sanctions slavery. Take it, she said. So I set off for the long walk home with the book under my arm. Then I thought to myself that I would go and sit on the beach for a while. We were always warned not to go to the beach alone. The beach could be a dangerous place. Men who have no jobs and do nothing but drink – well, you want to stay out of their way. But I didn’t care. I just wanted to read my book. So I lay on the sands of Tamarin, reading. My friend was quite right about the book. But she neglected to say that it was beautiful, and charming and moving too. As I was reading, a shadow fell across the page and I looked up. It was a white boy. This golden white boy with eyes like light on water. He was carrying a surf board. I had never seen one before. He asked, in English, and in an accent I had never heard before, what I was reading. That’s *my* name, he said, when I told him. Paul. He had never read the book. As he walked towards the water I stopped reading and watched him. Sometimes staring out to sea can be like looking at a fourth wall if you’re on an island: looking at the sea reminds you of just how trapped you are. But that afternoon, watching this boy surf, I felt the opposite. I had never seen anyone surf before. It looked so joyful, so free. Like watching a bird on the wind. I stayed for an hour just watching him. When he had finished, he came strolling back up the beach and sat down next to me. The beads of water on his skin caught the sun and made him shimmer. I could hardly bear to look at him. He asked me to tell him the story of *Paul et Virginie*. Then he asked

about me. There wasn't so much to say. And what about you, I asked. He came from a place called East London. A place in South Africa! He was just passing through Mauritius, he said. He was on his way to Australia for good. I don't feel at home in my own country. Look at us here on the beach. In some places we'd get arrested for being here together. He scrutinized me. You're so mixed, they wouldn't know how to classify you. And he laughed to himself. Can you believe in my country they *classify* people! It's worse than slavery, what's going on in my country. When I looked at him I had the strange feeling that he had holes instead of eyes and that somehow I was looking straight through him, to the sea. That night when I went home, Tante Mars asked if I had a fever. Your eyes look bright, she said. I told her I'd had a good time with my friend. That I would go to visit her again the next day. And so I went to Tamarin again, and watched the boy on the beach surfing and spent the evening talking to him. This happened a few times. On one of them, he took a chain from around his neck and fastened it around mine. The Patron Saint of Hermits, he said. He told me the story of the young man who went to live in the desert. Who was fed by a raven and whose grave was dug by desert lions who guarded his tomb. And then one day I went to the beach and I sat all day looking out to sea as though waiting for a ship to appear over the horizon. He never showed up and I was left alone there, watching those waves which I had never before thought of as empty.

(v) 1988

The day of England's big storm, Genie and Paul stayed at home. There was no school for Genie, since it was closed. And there was no school for Paul, who had left for good that summer. He had yet to find a job. Together with Mam they watched news footage of people moving in slow motion through flooded streets, of monumental oak trees snapped like toothpicks with something ridiculous and tragic about them, like felled elephants.

Imagine that, but ten times worse, Mam said, That's a cyclone.

Mam told them all about the cyclones she'd experienced in Mauritius as a child – how all the kids would huddle under their parents' beds while outside, roofs and trees and people were just snatched up, whirled in the wind like dead leaves.

Like the Wizard of Oz, Mam said. And that's what it felt like when I came here! But it wasn't Emerald, this city. I think we would have felt more at home in France, but your Grandpère chose England. He liked the jazz. He liked the tailoring, God rest his soul, and it was so strange! So grey! Anyway, yes, she said, with some satisfaction, Life is more fragile in Mauritius.

Not any more though, said Paul. They can make buildings cyclone-resistant now.

What do you know? she said. People are still living in shacks in Mauritius.

It's probably all changed now, Paul retorted, You haven't been back in years. Bet there are loads of new buildings there now.

But Mam insisted that if Nature (she often cited Nature where once she might have said God) decided to crush you, there was nothing you could do about it. Mam found this out herself when she went to her *potager* two days later and found all her precious plants ripped up as though a vandal had decided to destroy all that was beautiful and good in her garden. Her apple tree torn up from the ground. Nature had destroyed Nature. That was cannibalism, surely, or suicide. And she was crushed.

They had moved from Grandmère's place, into a council flat of their own. Grandmère too had moved. They visited her on Sunday afternoons to eat hunks of dry cake like mouthfuls of sand. Genie and Paul would twitch with boredom while Mam and Grandmère muttered together, their conversation syncopated by the heavy clock on the mantelpiece.

It was on one such visit shortly after the storm that Grandmère told Mam she had sold her council flat. Her plan was to go to Canada to live with Daniel and Fanchette. This time, when Grandmère patted her knees and said, *Enfin!* as she usually did to signal the end of the visit, Paul told Genie and Mam he would catch up with them. He wanted to talk to Grandmère alone. When he came home that night he told them Grandmère had agreed to his request for a loan to fund a computer course. Mam was delighted, Genie impressed.

Soon after that, the day after Paul had supposedly spent the night at a friend's house, they got a telephone call from him. He was in Port Louis. There had never been any computer course. He had wanted the money to go back to Mauritius. He was staying in the old house with Jean-Marie, Genie's half-brother, who now lived there with his friend Maja, he said. He felt at home there already.

That night, Genie woke from her sleep to find herself standing in Paul's empty room. She continued to walk in her sleep for the seven months while Paul was away. And during this time, she became difficult. Hateful, even. Mam put it down to lack of sleep.

Paul might have stayed in Mauritius indefinitely, but for Jean-Marie's death. After it happened, he rang Mam and told her he was coming home.

His flight was delayed, but finally, the doors parted and knots of people emerged: tanned holidaymakers – couples mostly – and then Mauritians, trolleys heaped with battered suitcases and plastic bags bearing unfamiliar logos. It didn't occur to Genie until then that she might not recognise her own brother. When she found herself looking at a lad on his own for a second longer than it took to dismiss him as not being Paul, he met her eyes and grinned and then she realised –

Eh – voila li-la

Mam nudged her and she fell forward, and he folded her in his arms.

He looked big and brown and strong and refused help with his bags. On the tube she sat opposite him and watched how he sprawled in the seat, bags spread at his feet. He nodded off a couple of times, or else stared into space. She saw how his body had broadened but his face had hollowed out. Then she looked past him to her own reflection distorted in the curve of the tube window, where she had two sets of eyes, as though she were wearing a pair of glasses pushed back on her head. She caught

Paul looking at her with an air of curiosity that dissolved into a vague sad smile when she met his glance.

Genie and Mam were oddly shy of this Paul, who was quite unlike the skinny surly boy who'd left them. He seemed too big for the kitchen. He looked as though the flimsy walls of the flat could hardly contain him, that if he breathed out too deeply, they would fall away. He seemed to know it too: there was something tensed about him, as though he were afraid to take up too much space. Mam hardly spoke. She barely looked at him as she served the food and joined them at the table. Genie rolled her eyes.

He's probably sick of Mauritian food. You should've done sausages and chips.

Don't worry Mam, the *lentilles* in Mauritius aren't as good as this.

He bent down to his spoon and gave Genie a cheeky wink. She looked away, annoyed that he'd contradicted her. When Paul finished he looked up at Mam:

Mo cav gagne encore?

She met his eyes, smiled fully for the first time that day and took his bowl to refill it, while Genie gaped: her brother, speaking *Creole*?

She asked him about that later on when they went over to the newsagent's to buy ice-cream.

Fabs. They're your favourite, right? said Paul, leaning into the deep-freezer.

Oh no. I like Mivvis now.

They walked outside with their lollies and ripped them open.

In Mauritius, Paul said, lollies come in totally different flavours. Really exotic ones like guava and mango. Even lychee-flavoured.

Genie pulled a face.

I hate lychees, she said, they remind me of eye-balls.

I know they do.

They walked slowly towards the park, licking their lollies in the honeyed light of the late afternoon.

So, he said. Tell me everything. How have you been?

She told Paul about the friends she'd made on the estate since he'd left. Friends Mam didn't approve of. Mam never mentioned them by name. They were always *tifi anglaise* or *tifi noire*.

Whenever I say she's being racist she says she's got nothing against English people. Or black people. She always says *Girls like that grow up quicker*. She says

she doesn't want to see me growing up too quickly. Well, how can I grow up *too* quickly? I'm growing up as quick as I'm growing up. I mean I *do* have to grow up. Otherwise I'd be like a spastic or something. Does she want me to be a spastic or something?

Mam says you've gone off the rails a bit since I left. You want to watch it. She's thinking about boarding school.

I don't care, she said, trying to detach her tongue from the burning ice. So anyway, how come you can speak Creole now?

She wanted to ask about Jean-Marie but Mam had warned her not to mention him.

I thought I'd forgotten it all but it's dead easy to pick up again if everyone around you is speaking it.

Don't they speak English over there?

Yep.

So why didn't they speak to you in *English*?

Well, I wanted to learn Creole, didn't I?

That's like Latin or something. Nobody really speaks it, do they? Well, only people in Mauritius.

Only? There are about a million Mauritians just in Mauritius.

But it's not a proper language, is it? You can't write it or anything.

Actually, you can. But I had my reasons for wanting to learn it.

Like what?

I didn't want to feel left out.

They sat on the swings. Genie struggled to catch the drips from her lolly while Paul told her about the gang of guys he'd hung out with over there – Jean-Marie, Jean-Marie's friends. One called Gaetan who Paul had got on well with. And then there was Maja. The one who lived with Jean-Marie. Genie might remember him from when they lived over there as kids. A nasty bloke, Paul said. The one I had the big fight with. Genie held her breath, wondering if he would mention Jean-Marie. Gaetan was a fisherman, Paul continued. He lived down south. He'd put Paul up after Jean-Marie had been killed. But Paul only shrugged when Genie asked, automatically and almost without curiosity, what the fight had been about.

Genie had a special technique for eating Mivvis: she would suck the juice out of her lolly until it was a watery pink, veined with frost. Then she would bite off the

tip and crunch down into the ice-cream centre. She thought about what Paul was saying and felt a new kind of fear and fascination: who were these people? She had always known everyone Paul knew. Not knowing Creole – barely able to remember her own half-brother, who she would never know now – who she could not think of as dead since he had only ever really been a memory – and not knowing his friends, not knowing Mauritius – made *her* feel left out. Genie knew Creole only as the language of adults. The language they were told off in at home.

I would much prefer to be treated like a visitor. Then people would take you out and stuff, and treat you. *I* would have made them all speak English to me.

Paul nudged her and smiled,

Ti lamerde, ou tetu com spaqua, toi.

Just because I can't speak it any more, doesn't mean I can't understand.

So what did I just say?

Something about me being a little shit.

Yeah, a *stubborn* little shit. And if you could speak Creole, you could answer me back, couldn't you?

Paul had brought presents: a CD for Genie, and for Mam a paper bag full of seeds.

What kind of seeds are these? she asked.

They're a surprise, he said. Plant them and see what comes up.

Nothing illegal, I hope. It is a council allotment you know.

What sort of music is this? Genie asked, looking at the CD doubtfully. *Seggae*.
What's that?

A cross between reggae and sega – the old Mauritian music you hear at weddings. Just listen to it. It's what all the kids in Mauritius are into.

Years later, he told her he'd lied, that in fact at the time all the kids her age were listening to Michael Jackson or Madonna. But he'd wanted to give her something Mauritian. Genie only played the CD a couple of times. The rhythms were unfamiliar and she couldn't understand the lyrics. And to hear the various bands she'd never heard of not only talking but *singing* in a language she'd heard only with family, disturbed her. And then the CD got absorbed into Paul's collection, which he took with him when he moved in with Eloise a year later, and Genie never saw it again.

As for the seeds, they never took root.

(vi) Bel Gazou

When Eloise's mother answered the door she was wearing her dressing-gown. It looked like the limp wings of some tropical butterfly. She did not seem to recognise Genie, who announced herself as Eloise's friend from school. Eloise's mother looked blank, then, without a change in expression said, Oh, Paul's sister. She might have said more but was distracted by the cat, a blue persian with knotted fur that was stalking past her, towards the open door.

Bel Gazou, she scolded, bending to scoop it up, one hand pulling closed the gap in her gown, briefly exposing the heavy blue vein which ran across the top of her breasts. Her nails were painted a dull glittery green.

You know you are not allowed outside, she murmured into the cat's head. It mewed in complaint and struggled free. Mrs Hayne nudged the cat inside with her bare foot and turned away into the house. Genie took this as an invitation to follow her inside.

The drawing room had been redecorated since Genie had last seen it. The walls were now dark and glossy, like holly leaves. Eloise's mother sat down and gestured for Genie to do the same. Genie complimented Bel Gazou on having aged well. She was told in almost admonishing tones that this was in fact Bel Gazou the *second* and when asked if Bel Gazou was then the daughter of Bel Gazou the first, said no, this Bel Gazou had been bought from a breeder, Bel Gazou the first being unable to have kittens.

The vet said she was not one of nature's mothers.

Ah yes, said Genie, remembering the weekend she had come to stay with Eloise when her mother had gone away. I remember now.

I am not really dressed for visitors.

I won't keep you.

Genie explained that she had rung Eloise several times but received no response. She had left messages at this number too. Eloise's mother blamed the cleaner. A Polish girl who was always deleting messages then not passing them on, apparently. But in any case Eloise was no longer living there. She was in East London now, living in one of her father's properties. She was working for him. Eloise's mother gave a quick cat-like yawn and asked if she might speak plainly.

If she's not answering I can only assume she doesn't want to speak to you. I wouldn't take that personally: you know how messy things got with Paul, how ill she got, and so on. It's been over a year now. I'm sure she just wants to put all that behind her. And you must remind her so much of him and their time together.

She still dyed her hair that same shade of red, Genie noted, as she followed Eloise's mother to the front door. The same shade Eloise dyed hers. This had always made Genie feel uneasy. As though Eloise's mother were overstating her claim to be just that. It made Genie uneasy long before she'd even known Eloise was adopted.

Genie had never been to Canary Wharf before. The DLR turned on a section of elevated track and a crop of buildings surged up, all of the same green-grey glass. They looked like the stalagmite eruptions of Kryptonite in Superman's secret cave. The company's offices were high up in one of the stalagmites. Genie felt increasingly claustrophobic the closer she got: walking first into the atrium, then up into the lift suite where she was shown into a lift itself, then through a maze of windowless corridors – the whole place artificially lit and climate-controlled – until Genie was so far removed from the outside world, she could have been underground. But instead, here she was hundreds of feet up in the air. It all looked so – so *professional*. Just like Eloise, she thought, peering through the internal window of her office, struck by how much she'd changed – the hair, the clothes, the poise. An act of camouflage. What had happened to the half-feral thing she'd been when she was with Paul?

As Genie was shown in, Eloise froze, then smiled ruefully, stretching out across the desk in a kind of horizontal yawn; a gesture of the old Eloise, at odds with the suit and the sleekness.

Genie, angered by this nonchalance, felt unable to look at her and moved to the window. She could almost see clouds below as she looked out, and now Eloise was beside her, telling her that the glass was bomb-proof and that the windows couldn't be opened. She tapped the steel window-frames to make her point. Then Genie noticed the fingernails, long and red and glossy. She was almost fooled. But the nails were fake, she saw, looking closer. Perhaps, underneath, Eloise's nails were still bitten.

You want to know about Paul, she said.

(vii) Eloise's story

I saw him a week ago. He seemed in a bad way. But maybe that's how he always was. Maybe I was always in such a bad way myself I never saw it. So let's say he was fine. As fine as he ever was. He wanted money. We met up round here one lunchtime and I gave it to him. I don't know what he wanted it for. I had a few ideas. But I didn't want to know. I didn't ask him about you, either. Why you've been trying to get hold of me. I guessed there was some connection. I gave him the money on condition he didn't contact me again. Look at me. I have a new life now. Do you know why I broke it off, in the end? Why, until last week, I had not seen him in a year? Let me tell you. We were living near Old Street. You never came by. You had your new job. It was a strange building, right on City Road but somehow invisible from the street. You walked through an iron door into a narrow overgrown garden and this tall, sooted, spindly building. I don't know what it was originally built for. A grain warehouse or something. There were six floors the size of hangers, several huge rooms on each. Paul and I had a floor to ourselves. Our bedroom overlooked the road but you couldn't hear a thing. It did my head in. Everything about it did my head in. That space. I felt like I was drowning in it. A guy on the floor above us had two pitbulls that would race each other up and down the corridor and around the empty rooms. This constant thundering and thumping. They're densely built dogs. They don't corner easily. And their nails! Shredding my nerves. I spent a lot of time in that room alone. A huge room with bare floorboards and everything we owned dumped in one corner like stuff that someone else had left behind. And me, on our mattress, in the other. Paul was out a lot, dealing or partying or both. I just sat indoors on my own, listening to those fucking dogs, getting iller and iller. It takes energy – courage - to live. I had none. So I just lay there, really. How did it come to that? This past year I've been wondering. I was a kid when I met your brother. Everyone should squat when they're a teenager. We were so free! Constantly on the move. Paul said something once. Wondering what it did to your mind, your sense of imagination to only ever live in the same type of space. Even a big wedding cake house like yours, he said, if it's all you'd ever know. It's gotta do something to your sense of scale. Perspective. But we lived in warehouses, in big old Victorian pubs, council flats, in semis, disused factories...even a boat. It worked the other way for us. We got lost in all that space. And left something behind every time we moved. People, sometimes.

Like Sol. By the time we got to City Road, there was very little left and I couldn't think about changing things. And then something happened.

Sometimes Paul brought people back. People I didn't like. I didn't like them for all kinds of reasons and you can guess what they were. But this one guy, Digs. He scared me. And at the time, I was so listless that I really didn't scare easily. He had these steeply sloped shoulders. They were so sloped his neck practically ran straight into his chest. Paul said he looked like an over-sharpened pencil. There was something about his eyes, too. They were like how an ice lolly goes when you've sucked all the colour out of it. They'd been out all night. They came into the room around midday. I was sitting there reading a magazine. Paul tells me to get up, we're going to Digs's place, Digs wants to show us something. He didn't live far, just in a block in Hoxton. I didn't want to go. But I got this funny vibe. I suddenly felt I needed to be there, that my being there would keep Paul safe. A lot of Paul's mates were 'proper East End'. People who'd lived in Hoxton and Shoreditch all their lives. I used to think he just liked villains – that's what a lot of them were – and I could see why because a lot of them are sharp and funny like Paul. Like Paul *was*. But now I'm not so sure. I think it was more the strong sense they had of themselves. Who they were. They lived in the same place as they'd been born in, as their parents and grandparents had been born in. These guys knew who they were. And they had their code. That appealed to Paul in a very strong way. But when it came down to it, Paul was not one of them. And there was something a bit...*loose* about Digs. I was loose enough myself to know it when I saw it. So I went with them. Digs takes us to his flat, one in a council block round the back of Hoxton Market. As soon as I walked into that place, I feared for my life. The front room of this tiny council flat crammed with – well it looked like a herd – of occasional tables, all of them crowded with fancy little figurines: sad clowns, dimpled shepherdesses, pigs in fancy-dress. Totally Pound Shop. Impressive how Digs manoeuvred his way around all that tat without breaking anything, telling us to watch this or that as we made our way to the sofa. The place looked so *normal* and the two of them so spannered, teeth grinding, these horrible grins when they thought they were smiling – the place reeking of Glade and psychosis. Then Digs says, Amazing, isn't it? And I notice the fish tank. It was on the wall-unit. This *huge* tank. And in it, one solitary, splendid turquoise fish, like no fish I've ever seen before. Its tail was like an ostrich-feather fan. Very burlesque. Shimmery blue like one of those huge Brazilian butterflies. So I'm looking at this fish

and I think, There's something wrong with it. I couldn't work out what. Then I realised. It was absolutely still. Not patrolling its tank like fish usually do, but just hanging there, suspended in the water, like it was waiting for something to happen. And it was. Something was about to happen. Digs asks us what we think of his fish. Goes up to the tank and makes a kissy face. It's a Siamese Fighting Fish he says. Then he points to a smaller tank on the shelf above. There's a smaller fish in it. Reddish pink and mottled. It looked like it had a skin condition. Its tail and fins looked kind of ragged, and dragging, like a kid dressed in grown-up's clothes. Digs tells us he's got to keep them separate. Two males in a tank will fight until there's only one's left. Like nick. He can't even let them see each other. You want to see what happens when you hold a mirror up to 'em. Then he turns to Paul and asks which one he fancies. For the fight. My heart sinks but Paul looks blank. So Digs spells it out. He's gonna make them fight. And he wants Paul to bet on one. Double or quits, he says. If Paul wins, he'll wipe his slate clean. If not, he'll double it. OK, Paul says, I'll take the blue one. Digs says he fancies that one too. So they're gonna have to toss for it. And it's Digs who does the toss. Paul smiling to himself, because he can see by now he's walked straight into this one. Paul loses the toss. He gets the red one. He just shrugs. What else can he do? Looks like a survivor, he says. A fighter. You take the pretty one then. So Digs takes out a small net and dips it into the smaller tank and tips the red fish into the tank with the blue fish. The second it takes for Paul's fish to right himself is the second it takes for Digs's fish to go at him with all the force he's gathered in his hours and hours of stillness. I see the lunge and I close my eyes and when I open them again a split second later all I see is flashes of turquoise, flakes of mottled red and ribbons of blood unfurling like fag smoke in the water. A second ago I couldn't look and now I can't look away. I can't look away until the blue fish has ravaged that red fish and there's no more movement in the tank, just a flurry of ripped up scales, the whole thing looking like one of those snowglobes you shake up, except the water is pink like dentists' mouth-rinse. That's when Digs dips his net into the bowl, almost gently, careful to avoid *his* fish, which is, just like it had been before the fight, absolutely motionless. Digs tips the dead fish onto the carpet. Nudges the thing with his foot. Says to Paul, Flush that.

My dad always said there'd be a job for me, a flat for me, if I split up with Paul. I could change my life. Up until that moment I could barely consider it. Just thinking about it made me feel exhausted. Sometimes it's easier to go along with the

life you find yourself in than to think about changing it. But that morning something kicked in. I had to get out. The way Paul was going something bad was going to happen. And we had to pay off Digs. In the end I went crawling to my dad. He told me he'd give me the money if I got shot of Paul. I was relieved. Like he'd made the decision for me. After that I had to stop caring. That's what I told Paul when he came to see me in hospital just after we split. That I'd stopped caring. Then he came by last week. It fucked me up a bit, Genie, seeing him. I hope I never do again.

(viii) 1990

On Genie's first night at boarding school there was a rap on the fire-hatch above her bed, a small door in the wall which connected her to the next room. Before Genie could answer, it was pushed open and she saw a pale face. A figure climbed through onto her bed and stood on her legs.

Gerroff, said Genie, You're hurting me.

For such an ethereal-looking being, Eloise was heavy.

Sorry.

Eloise sat on the bed, by Genie's feet. It was then she realised Eloise was holding a bottle. Eloise took off the lid and waved it under her nose and sniffed it. Genie could feel by her reaction that it stung. She held out the bottle,

Want some?

No.

Genie must have sounded afraid because Eloise asked how old she was.

Twelve. Almost –

Christ. They're putting babies in here with me.

Genie asked the strange girl how old *she* was. Nearly fifteen, she said. In her mouth the *teen* had the sound of a fork tapped on the rim of a crystal glass.

That small door in the wall connected them, and though they would knock in warning before climbing through, Eloise would always end up treading on some part of her, or she on Eloise. Eloise was so thin Genie could feel the bones through the blankets as she swore at her. Life for Eloise was full of things to swear at. Genie would sit on her bed as Eloise talked about sex in an off-hand manner and sniffed that liquid which made her laugh and cry. She always offered Genie the bottle and Genie always refused, fascinated. Genie liked to watch her. And Eloise would look at her, moon-eyed, and stroke her skin.

Where are you from? she asked Genie one night.

My mum is from Mauritius. And my dad is too. It's a tiny island in –

I know where it is. That's where my mum's family were from. Though they came back to France before my mum was born.

Maybe our families knew each other! Genie gasped. Maybe we're related!

Maybe, said Eloise. Or maybe my family used to own your family.

One Saturday, Genie followed Eloise through a gap in the hedge of the hockey field, out into an alley, where they made their way into town. On that first visit, Genie had swaggered the seafront like a sailor on shore-leave, dazzled by the novelty. But when, three weeks later, Paul came to visit, she walked more slowly, wanting to immerse herself in a place she realised she only half-lived in. How *white* the place was! How she and Paul stood out. And that gave her a sense of the place being acutely English in a way that somehow felt very foreign. Like Eloise. But not like London at all. As they were walking along the seafront, Genie noticed Eloise walking towards them. It was the first time she had thought of Eloise as pretty, Genie realised. She was pretty in the slight, tattered way certain wildflowers were pretty: long-limbed, slim, a long-stemmed flower. It was the ragged fringe and the pale eyes and maybe also the drifts of cigarette smoke which hung about her. But she had dense, compressed features, almost Slavic, which threw you off somewhat. It took a while for people to work out that she was beautiful, Eloise would later tell her. She was on her way to Roxy's, she said.

She had taken Genie there on that first trip into town. She had bought Genie a fudge sundae and sat smoking Menthols while Genie tucked in, not daring to look further than her engorged spoon, afraid of the boys slapping and thumping the games machines around them; rough, white boys with gelled hair and raw skin who were suddenly leaning towards them, staring at Eloise while she blew smoke-rings and stared back with narrowed eyes.

Now Eloise was looking at Paul that same way. And he looked almost hostile, Genie thought, like one of those sneering lads, as Eloise said goodbye and they walked off in opposite directions.

It was a Sunday and they had skipped mass. They were alone on Castle Hill and walked around the ruins of Hastings Castle, arm in arm. The sky seemed burdened with cloud. Eloise said,

You get witches here, you know.

Genie thought about the part of town they had walked through to get there. Where the shops gave up all pretence of being commercial outfits and resigned themselves to what they really were – the front rooms of slumped houses. In the windows old radios and hoovers, hamster-wheels, dusty cakes, collections of old medals from forgotten wars, displays of fifties-style satin dresses, some faintly

stained, hanging stiffly. It was easy to imagine the place full of witches but they were Mrs Cantriggs: dowdy, ageing, fusty-smelling spinster witches with worn-out powers and malting broomsticks.

You're wrong, said Eloise. There's powerful magic here. Black magic. Hastings is built on leylines.

Genie knew about those. Paul had explained them to her. She told Eloise about his theory, that tube lines corresponded with other kinds of lines: blood lines, ley lines. All kinds of power lines. And Eloise asked,

How come you and your brother are different colours?

Different dads, Genie shrugged.

They clambered onto the ruins and stood looking down at the town, which lay caught in a cracked shell of cloud below. The fishing boats on the beach looked like tiny Chinese slippers and all the town's movement was stilled at their great height. Even the waves out at sea seemed to break in slow motion.

Why do people say they're scared of heights when what they really mean is that they're scared of falling? Genie asked.

They were balanced on the broken wedge of wall, clutching each other, poised just so – so that if one of them moved, she would fall, and if she fell, the other would fall with her.

They're not afraid of falling, said Eloise. They're afraid of landing. If you carried *on* falling, it would be OK. Then she said, He's almost the colour of honey.

By summer, they were inseparable. And when Genie was in the infirmary with glandular fever, Eloise was in the bed right beside her, recovering from a spell of fainting fits. Sometimes Eloise would undress in front of her, daring her to stare. Eloise was so pale she looked like all the blood had been pumped out of her. But it was her bra that made Genie sad. Genie did not yet possess one herself but the bras she had seen in the laundry pile were teen-bras, pretty things. This was an old woman's bra, stiff with rough lace and heavy-looking like an Elastoplast bandage. It was the colour they used to call 'Flesh', the colour of calamine lotion. Eloise looked so frail that it seemed to Genie that the bra was holding her up.

In the long liquid evenings they would look out of the infirmary windows onto the other girls in the gardens outside, feeling the warm air on their faces. It was hard

to sleep at night, in the high soft beds. They decided that they would spend as much of the holidays as they could together.

You could come to my house, said Eloise. You could meet Bel-Gazou. You could bring Paul.

During the holidays, Genie received a card. It was a scratchy drawing of a woman with long red hair scraped back from her bony face. Tendrils of hair hung in her large bulging eyes. She was sitting with her knee drawn up to her chin. She looked half-starved. She looked sulky. Paul, looking over Genie's shoulder said, That's from Eloise, isn't it? She thinks it looks like her. That's why she sent it.

Her mum's going away. She's invited me to come and stay.

Watch it. She's trouble.

But he did not say anything to Mam.

Genie could not believe Eloise lived in such luxury – in a whole house, one of those huge white ones with pillars, like wedding cake. Eloise showed her around in a desultory fashion, kicking at the antique furniture, trailing a hand through the rack of designer dresses in Mrs Hayne's walk-in wardrobe – Bel-Gazou's favourite hiding place, and the size of Mam's bedroom at home – sneering at it all. Genie kept quiet, trying to remember everything so she could tell Mam afterwards.

They looked at the collection of drinks in Mrs Hayne's cocktail cabinet, the spirits which were clear as water until Eloise swilled the bottle and you saw the thick oiliness of the liquid inside, the shapely bottles of sticky liqueurs, which, held to the light, entranced Genie with their jewelled colours. They picked off the sugary crusts which had formed on the open mouth of the bottles and sucked on them.

Taste this one, Eloise commanded, sticking out her finger. On its tip was something crystallised.

Looks like bogies.

Taste it.

With the tip of her tongue she dabbed the tip of Eloise's finger. It was bitter, it was sweet.

Guess which bottle that came from?

When she guessed correctly she was rewarded with a swig of Campari. It looked as though it should have tasted of raspberries but instead tasted like medicine. Genie passed the bottle back to Eloise who glugged from it, and passed it back to her.

Don't worry, shrugged Eloise as Genie realised with a panic that the bottle was now empty, I'll just tell my mum that *she* drank it all. She always believes me.

Then she said, Let's ring Paul.

When Paul arrived he told Genie he would tell her off the next morning, when she was hungover, so it would hurt more. That she wouldn't remember anything he said to her in this state anyway. Then he helped her to the bathroom and held back her hair while she was sick. When she asked about Eloise he looked annoyed. Your *friend*, he said, has left me to clean up her mess while she dances about in the living room. The Stone Roses though, he said, almost to himself, so we'll let her off.

Then Genie passed out.

She could tell by the light when she woke that it was early in the afternoon. She was alone in Eloise's double bed which they had shared the night before. Outside her room, on her way to find them both, she saw a bloody lump on the thick pale carpet. In it was something like a jelly baby. She picked it up and held it to the light. She saw a tiny foetus which lay curled like a blue prawn in its sac. It must have come from Bel Gazou. A miscarried kitten. She followed the the thick strings of blood which trailed to the master bedroom. When she pushed opened the door she saw them. El, with her hair spread over the pillow, her old lady's lacy bra unclasped, her small breasts and large, rosy nipples exposed, and Paul, lying over her, nothing on but the chain around his neck, the medal now hovering over Eloise's face, as though her were trying to hypnotise her with it, both of them looking up to see Genie looking.

(ix) The Meeting

Genie, opening her eyes, lay stunned as the sun kicked sand in them. She felt as she had done on regaining consciousness in hospital: that same not knowing for a few seconds where she was, or who she was, and if she felt anything at all it was a sense of being scattered, of waking up after an explosion, bits of her blown up all over the place with her limbs all tangled up – tangled up in someone else's limbs, whoever he was, this boy in the bed beside her. His bed. His flat. Where was she? He was still asleep, his face hidden by an arm which was fixed across her like a crook-lock. Gradually, she remembered. She'd spent the evening trawling Paul's old haunts, looking for Paul, asking people if they'd seen him. And in the last bar, having drunk several drinks over the course of the evening, she'd decided that if she wanted to find Paul, she would have to stop looking so hard, looking so *obvious*. She would have to give herself up to chance and see where this took her. And so she had gone home with this stranger. Genie, stealing out from under him, could not remember where in London she was until ten minutes later when she opened the main door of the block where he lived, and walked out into a street close to what she soon recognised as Smithfields market. Without having a sense of where she was going – but knowing it was not home – she headed for Farringdon station. The sky was white with racing clouds and her face stung from the whipping it was getting from her hair: one of those strong Thames breezes which reminded her that the river was somehow always just around the corner, even though it could not be seen.

Genie's London was a limited place, she realised now: a tight circle described by home, work and the few places she went at night. While Paul's London was unknown to her. She could only search his *old* London. The one she'd once shared with him. But that search had turned up nothing. She would have to break free of their London altogether if she were to increase her chances of finding him. The logical leads, such as they were, had led nowhere. She would have to trust to fate. And now she would meet fate more than halfway. She would tempt it.

Walking by the meat-market, she passed porters in their bloodied and yellowed white coats, heaving around sides of meat. Big lorries lay panting at the mouths of storage depots and in the gutter she saw the leg of a pig, and its trotter, then further along not quite a pig's head, but its face. Genie wondered if they were all from the same animal. And then there were the spots of blood on the pavement. They

looked like bullet holes, scorchmarks. Further along someone had trodden in blood and left a smeared boot-print. As she walked down Farringdon Road she saw more office workers, young secretaries in their cheap hi-fashion shoes, wobbling slightly as they walked. Genie noticed that there were no really old people here. No kids either. Only 'useful' people. Their determination made Genie feel as though they were late for meetings with their more successful selves. They all wanted to be somebody she thought, and then she thought of Paul: someone who wanted to be somebody else, or, rather, anyone else but himself. Across the road a tabby cat, striped like a mackerel, stalked the gutter, sniffing at something. It looked out of place here, this domesticated wild thing among all the office workers.

At Farringdon Road station, Genie waited on the bridge for the first train to come in. It was Eastbound. She ran down the stairs and jumped onto it without thinking. Then, as it pulled away, wondered if perhaps she wouldn't be more likely to bump into Paul on a subterranean line instead: the Circle line was too airy, too many of the stations part-open to the world outside with cathedral ceilings and birds flapping along the platforms. At Embankment she got out, thinking perhaps she'd change to the Northern line, but on a whim decided to leave the underground altogether and walk somewhere instead. She was dragged for a moment by a riptide of tourists to the Thames entrance, until she pulled herself free and walked out onto Villiers Street, past the rows of hooded homeless mummified in their sleeping bags, heads bent monk-like in the warm light rain. She tried to get a look at their faces. A man by the park gates was selling umbrellas. He must wake up every day praying for rain, Genie thought.

And all the while, as she turned left into the Strand, past the gothic hollows of Charing Cross Station, past Trafalgar Square and up along Charing Cross Road, past places so familiar she barely saw them any more, these central streets which, unlike those at home in Hackney, scarcely felt as though they belonged to her, or if they did, they belonged to all Londoners, streets where all Londoners came together, past places where memories of Paul through the years were layered one over the other so that here she saw him emerge through the crowds clutching a bag full of paperbacks from a second-hand bookshop to disappear into a side-street, down to Bunjies Folk Cellar, or, there, down tin-pan alley, head leant on a shop window, looking at the drum-kits and further along, stumbling out of The Astoria, blinking in the too bright streetlights, fucked and boss-eyed after some night, all of these Pauls oblivious to one

another, with Genie catching sight of them one after the other from the corner of her eye as they darted through the crowds, Genie struggling to follow them so that she did not realise until she reached it that all the while she had actually had in mind a final destination. The hospital. The hospital where she'd been born. No, not born, she was hungover: confused. The hospital where she'd almost *died*. She could not call *this*, her arrival here, now, an accident. But perhaps it would lead to one: perhaps she would meet Paul here, arriving, too late, to visit her.

Surely, thought Genie, walking slowly around the perimeter of the hospital, when something, someone, is so wanted, so that he was almost there in front of her, but in some closely-aligned parallel universe, utterly unreachable, she could, just by wanting him so badly, will him into existence? Could she not make him materialise in front of her? Summon him like the devil he was?

Passing a side entrance she observed a group of people smoking with a kind of desperation which made them seem troubled. And they *were* a group, not simply the relatives of patients or hospital staff on a break gathered casually. They had apparently arranged to meet here. The group seemed to be mainly men in their late twenties to forties, with only a few women, one of them beautifully turned-out, wrapped in a butter-coloured pashmina, whose face, when she turned in Genie's direction, looked deeply ravaged despite the care she had obviously taken with her appearance. The woman was moving to hug a new arrival, her pashmina swinging loose to shroud them both. When she stood back to readjust it, Genie was given a clear view of the man who had just joined them. She cried out then in surprise. At times like this, hungover, Genie had only a fragile sense of who she was, like bad reception on an analogue TV, one of those old black-and-white ones with the calligraphic aerials: a slight movement, a shift in perspective and she lost the picture. In her shaky state, coincidence was not a rare but meaningless phenomenon. In this state, it felt sinister. This coincidence could mean nothing or everything. She had lost the picture but she had been right after all to stare closer at the static and find meaning in it. She'd been right all along, she thought, as she ran over to the group, and to Sol.

She had come to this bar the previous night in her search for Paul. The Dragon Bar on Leonard Street, where she had arranged to meet Sol after his meeting, had been a favourite of Paul's when he lived on Kingsland Road, but no one ever saw him here these days. The clientele had changed. They looked like the people Genie worked

with. Young or youngish – people who still knew how to pass as young, with directional haircuts, the right trainers. She had come here with Paul just after her graduation. He'd taken her for a pint to celebrate. He'd looked around at these unknown faces and said something odd about wasted talent: about knowing you'd wasted your talent when you turned the bend. When you began to recognise all the places you passed on your way to whatever point it was you'd started going backwards. Whatever he'd meant by that. He'd been smoking a lot of weed at the time. And that jacket! It was the one she and Mam had got for his sixteenth. He'd wanted a leather jacket, the heavy, creaking, rock-god kind but they'd got him a leatherette bomber from Ridley Road. Around that time, Paul had taken to wearing it again. Twenty-seven and as skinny as he'd been as a teenager. He wore it so often that in the end the leatherette flaked away when he rubbed it, like dead skin. And something else he'd said that night, she remembered now. About how lately everyone he saw reminded him of someone else. A lot of things Paul said had been lost at sea. They washed up now and again. She felt someone kiss the top of her head. She looked up. It was Sol.

They talked of how they'd been. Sol mentioned the meetings. He looked better for going, Genie said. Though privately she thought he looked as delicate as he always had. Pale and thin. Dark and unshaven. A smudged charcoal sketch of a man. Four years that month, he said. It had been time to give all of that up. Speaking of which, how was Paul? That was why she'd wanted to meet, Genie said. She told him about going to hospital. When he pressed for details Genie told him how she'd nearly drowned: how she'd drunk so much water her organs had gone haywire. Had Paul been with her that night? Yes, said Genie, but she'd lost him. They'd heard nothing of him since. He'd run off somewhere. Sol put his head in his hands.

Don't tell me *he* gave you the pill.

That's why I'm worried about him. It's been three weeks now. I want him to know I'm OK. That I don't blame him.

And then Genie surprised herself by telling Sol something she hadn't even realised she'd been thinking; that maybe Paul disappearing had been inevitable; maybe it was something he'd been mulling over for a while. Maybe what happened that night had just pushed him over the edge. That was possible, Sol admitted. I haven't seen him since our fight. I thought he was running out of options then but

from what I heard from Eloise, things got worse for him. I sometimes think he might have had a different life if he'd never met me.

You can't take the blame. You did meet him at a rave.

No I didn't. He'd never been to one until he met me. He never told you the real story of how we met. He was too ashamed.

Tell me, said Genie.

(x) Sol's Story

We met in hospital. It was 1990. We were participants on a medical trial. Don't judge him till you hear what he wanted the money for. Six weeks, we spent, sleeping next to each other. He'd told your mum he was off grape-picking or something. I remember the time I first noticed him. We'd only just started the trial. It was in the early hours of the morning. I couldn't sleep. I opened my eyes to find the bloke in the next bed looking at me. His eyes were open, staring straight into mine, shining like an animal's in the dark. Then they shut again. Weird. Don't know if he'd even been properly awake. The next day neither of us acknowledges the other. It went on like that for a while. Time's like chewing gum when there's nothing much to do except be experimented on. There was the pool table, but that got taken over by the ex-cons and the nutters. The ones who signed up for the danger money trials. Tests where they stopped your heart or flooded your lungs or burnt k-holes into your brain. We kept well clear. We just read or watched TV. Me and Paul were of a kind. We knew it ourselves. But neither of us really knew where to start. Then one day, one of the nurses brings Paul in a backgammon set. He asks if I want a game. I didn't know how to play. So he taught me. Not just the rules but the strategies as well. He wanted me to give him a good game. So we start playing. And when we started playing, we didn't stop. We played first thing. We played while we ate. We played when the doctors were doing their rounds. We played late at night, using wads of bogroll to muffle the sound of the dice. When people asked if we weren't bored of playing, we let the clatter of dice speak for us. We played one long game. We agreed that backgammon beat chess hands down for the great swathe of chance that cut across the gameplay. We liked the speed and the sudden turns of fortune. But eventually, just playing wasn't enough. Winning wasn't enough. Fear of losing wasn't enough. We began to play for dares. Progressively daring dares. Who would have to give the winner their biscuits at tea-time. Who would have to alert the nurse to imaginary side-effects (hallucinations, glow-in-the-dark spunk). Who would have to ask Spider in the end bed if he ever regretted getting that tattoo done. And so we lay on our beds day after day, moving our plastic men across those 2D spikes, moving them all home. So imagine how we felt one morning when Paul reaches for the set and it's gone. Spider comes up. Asks us if we've lost something. We know it's him but he won't admit it. Then the nurse has a go about us causing trouble. So we give it up. And that's when

we started talking. I mean really talking. About ourselves. Why we were in there. Paul wanted the money to go back to Mauritius. He'd gone over last year, he said. But he'd come running back to London when his brother got killed. Jean-Marie, I remember his name. But there was nothing for him here. He missed the place. Not just Mauritius, I've realised since. I think it was also his brother he was missing – not his brother at all I know now, but your half-brother. He sounded pretty cool, that guy. Paul told me a lot about him, about the island, about all the things he did over there. But most of all, he talked about Jean-Marie. I remember one story about him. Nothing much happens but it told me something about him. Made me see him how Paul might have done. Him and all his crew, the ones Paul hung out with, they used to go to this same spot to fish and smoke weed. You couldn't see them from the road. I remember how Paul described it. The foliage dense and full of litter. They'd sit around, looking out to the processing plants and factories by the docks of Port Louis, and Jean-Marie would say shit like, Call that a capital city? or How many Londons could you fit into that? I think that's what Paul dug about him. He was bittersweet. Too big for the island. They'd sit passing beers and joints around while they set up the rod over the smooth oily water. Paul said the first time they took him there, Jean-Marie pointed to this rainbow patch on the water and told him the fish they caught came in its own oil. No need to stick any in the pan when they fried it. And that's what they'd do when they caught the fish – fry it up with garlic, and chilli and salt and eat it, hot and fresh, with their hands. So this is how they sometimes spent their Saturdays. But one afternoon, this copper comes along with a sidekick. He's new to the force. He must have seen them on the road and followed them down there. He picks Jean-Marie out as a face and says he wants to search him. None of them can believe this. They were six against two of them and they were hidden from the road. And these facts appeared to have dawned on the man only after he'd issued the order, though now he had no choice but to see it through. This he did more brusquely than he might otherwise have done, to mask his fear.

Jean-Marie stood up, brushed himself down and raised his arms.

Search me if you like, he shrugs, But show me your hands first.

Think you're smart, don't you? the cop says, but still he did as Jean-Marie asked.

His disappointment at not finding anything on him was probably mixed with relief: he cut his losses and wisely decided against searching the rest of them. Which

was lucky, because Maja, the one who, well you know – he was holding their *ganja*. Apparently Maja used to like telling Paul, whenever they were smoking, how you could be stuck in prison for possession of just one joint. But this is the bit I remember about the story. As the cop turns to leave, Jean-Marie calls out to him in an almost friendly way, I'm going to get you, you know. I don't know when, but I will...

We got our backgammon set back in the end. Spider was in for eye medicine. Something went wrong. Some kind of discharge. He ended up with his eyes bandaged over. No more pool games for Spider. In the end it was a simple thing for Paul to creep up to his bedside locker and nick back our stolen board. Spider heard him. Sat up in bed, bellowing, waving his arms around like a mummy. Fucking hilarious. We sat by his bed and played our first game in ages, rattling the dice really loudly. This time, when we played, it was different. This time we talked while we played. We talked about music and films. Cricket and football. And girls. And he told me about you. Me, I told him about Berlin. Helping to pull down that wall. I told him about squatting. Raving. All the parties I'd been to. The drugs I'd taken. I offered to take him on a night out after the trial was over. Your farewell party, I said. Before you go back to Mauritius. But of course he never went. I think that's where he's gone now, Genie.

(xi) 1992

In the two years that Paul and Eloise had been squatting together, they had moved four times. Now they were living in an old Victorian terraced house at the Shoreditch end of Kingsland Road with Sol, among others, and on the night of her fifteenth birthday, Genie came to stay with them. They were taking her to a club. Genie assumed it would be a club in the West End: there was nothing round where they lived. She hated the area, how it was always windy on Old Street, as if the air itself was in no hurry to linger, with nothing around but locksmiths, glaziers, sad little sandwich bars, tatty little offices and pubs with boarded-up windows, boasting live exotic dancers. But the club was in Shoreditch Town Hall. And it wasn't really like a club at all, Paul explained, as they left the house, since it was one where you could take kids. As they entered the main room Genie felt like she'd walked into a hippie's wedding reception. There were kids and parents and people of all ages in between or older, those being the biggest kids: running about in what looked like clown trousers, batting balloons to and fro and sucking on lollies, drinking from bottles of pop. Genie had hoped to get drunk on Southern Comfort and lemonade but no alcohol was served here. Paul and Eloise didn't seem to care though. Genie watched them rubbing up against each other like cats all night. Eventually, after noting how Eloise had lost her spikiness and Paul his usual wired self, both of them becoming something almost molten and fused, Genie concluded that they had taken Ecstasy. She knew they did this regularly but she had never before been around them when they had. She felt uncomfortable around these strangers and drifted away.

At the end of the night they found her outside in the corridor and brought her back into the hall. Everyone there was sitting on the floor. Ambient music was playing. Paul and Eloise found a spot near Sol and pulled her down beside them, just as a parachute drifted gently down from the ceiling, trapping everyone together in a benevolent bubble of silk. It was a bit of an obligation, Genie thought, like you were *expected* to feel something, but she acted like she thought it was all magical, the way Paul and Eloise were wanting her to. But Sol, under cover of the parachute, gave her a sneaky dig in the ribs and smiled apologetically, even though he too was on a pill.

Afterwards they walked back to the squat. It felt like all the other squats Paul had lived in and decamped from over the past couple of years; the rooms damp and chilly,

filled with broken bits of bikes and all kinds of rubbish, lit with hundreds of candles, the windows covered in sheets, patches of old people's wallpaper – large cabbage roses or trellis patterns – stuck fast to the plastered walls. It felt at once like home, in that it felt like all the other places they had lived in, but then again, not, because they lived in a way that indicated they knew they would have to leave at short notice, like refugees.

Paul and Eloise disappeared while Genie sat in the living room, yawning on the bald velour sofa, the diseased heart of the house transplanted to each place they moved to. She was waiting for them to bring out blankets. She preferred not to enter any room where they were alone, even after knocking. Remembering the time she'd walked in on them could still make her angry for reasons she couldn't fathom. She was jealous, of course, but of what or whom, she couldn't tell. She lay on the sofa and closed her eyes.

Sol, on his way back from the kitchen with a glass of water, asked where she was sleeping. She patted the sofa. There were a few rooms free, he said. The others had gone to some Spiral Tribe thing. She declined. She didn't want to sleep in their beds. They were too relaxed about their personal hygiene. Sol offered her his room. He would take the sofa. If he got her some blankets, she said, she would be fine down here. Suit yourself, he said. Though you could always bunk up with me. Might be comfier. But before she could reply he had gone upstairs. He returned shortly afterwards with a duvet.

Genie woke in the night after a series of dreams filled with flowers. In the first, she had wandered into the school's hockey field at night to find it filled with overgrown delphiniums. They swayed over her. She began to dance with one of the delphiniums, under a sky whose many stars mirrored the delphiniums around her. She was naked. In another dream, the large elm tree outside the school chapel was filled with flowers, and from it hung a swing on which she sat and rocked. She awoke to hear music coming from the room above. Sol was still awake. She threw aside the duvet and went upstairs.

He lay reading by candlelight, smoking a joint.

Can I stay here? I think I heard a mouse...

'Course.

The opportunity to share a bed with Sol thrilled and frightened her. The bed – a mattress on the floor – looked too intimate when Sol flung back a corner of the

covers, exposing the sheets. She was embarrassed to look at it. She focused on a pair of shoes instead – proper men’s shoes – quite unlike the fat skate trainers Sol always wore. Have you got a job interview? He laughed. His mum had bought them for him. For a wedding. And then she asked if he could put them away because shoes with no feet in them looked spooky to her, like empty eye-sockets. He looked amused and said, Of course, and climbed out of bed. He put the shoes behind a box of records.

Here, he said, passing her a folded t-shirt from a pile. A nightie for you.

The room was dark when she came back from the bathroom. She could smell the affronted smell of a candle that had been snuffed out. She was grateful he couldn’t see her, suddenly feeling shy. She made her way round the edge of the room, carrying her pile of clothes, aware of every step. When she slid in next to Sol, she could smell him on the sheets. It was disturbing. She lay awake for a long while, rigid on her side of the bed, anxious not to touch him accidentally, aware that he was not yet asleep either, wondering if he, like her, was struggling to control his breathing.

Around dawn Genie woke with a lurch: someone had come into the room. The sky outside was light and she could see Paul creeping over to Sol’s jeans, cast aside on the floor at the end of the bed. Paul rifled through the pockets and pulled out a packet of Rizlas. As he turned to leave he noticed Genie in the bed, watching him.

What the *fuck* are you doing here?

You didn’t leave me any blankets.

Go and sleep in Tom or Anke’s room.

No. They smell.

Well, let me get you some blankets then.

Nah. I’m comfy here. What do you think he’s going to do? *Rape* me?

He didn’t look happy. He looked as though he were about to say something. But then he changed his mind and left the room. The noise had disturbed Sol who shifted and grunted a little in his sleep. Genie leaned close and whispered Shhh. On a whim, she kissed him lightly on the lips. She did it again, and, without knowing she was going to, slipped her tongue in his mouth. His tongue seemed to melt on hers. He opened his eyes and pulled away sharply.

Woah. Genie...

But she kissed him again. This time, he kissed her back. She slid her hand under the covers, over his naked chest. Her fingers felt strangely numb – numb in the sense that they were feeling too much – as though their fuses had blown – like that

instant of confusion before you worked out if something you were touching was very hot, or very cold. And she discovered what he felt like, which was tense and knotty...smooth and firm and sparsely haired there, and here, feeling him through the thin soft material of his shorts, amorphous, tightening into veins and ridges. She heard the hardening of his breath as she slipped a hand inside his shorts and gripped his cock. His eyes, already closed, closed tighter. And then he was touching her. The more she learnt, she thought, the more she realised how ignorant she was. And when it got too much to look at him she tried to hide herself in his body, burying her face in his armpit, the hollow inside the thin bulge of bicep a rockpool in which she found seaweed hairs and the smell of garden fences warmed in the sun.

He was still asleep but his eyes were not fully shut. She could see a tiny crescent of white beneath the lids, barred by lashes spiked with eye-dew. His eyelashes were long and ragged, like torn netting. She unclasped his arm and got out of bed. Downstairs she made herself a cup of tea and sat watching cartoons, her knees pulled up to her chest under Sol's t-shirt, a strange, sweet, ache around her inner thighs. Paul came in and told her to get dressed.

I'm buying you breakfast. Just you and me.

Goody, yawned Genie. I'm staaaaaaaaarving.

How come you're so hungry? Paul looked horrified.

Then Genie reminded him that no one else had wanted to eat last night.

I had enough trouble getting a kebab out of you.

Genie slid her tinned tomato onto Paul's plate. They make me eat them at school. Every time I look at them I think of the Sacred Heart. Paul prodded the tragic, pulpy thing with his fork and watched it bleeding weakly.

I never gave you your birthday present.

I thought I had it last night. My night out.

Yes, said Paul, but I've been thinking. There's something else I want to give you. He leaned forward and brought his hands to the back of his neck, unfastening the chain which hung there.

I can't take that.

You can and you will.

He got up from his chair and walked behind her. She felt him brush aside her hair as he fastened the chain around her neck.

I don't want you sleeping in Sol's bed again, he said.

When Genie asked why not he said she bloody well knew why not.

Please tell me nothing happened.

Nothing happened, Genie said. But so what if it had? Eloise had been fifteen when she got involved with Paul.

Nearer sixteen, said Paul. And Sol's older than I was. But most of all, Genie, *you are not Eloise.*

On their way back to the squat, they passed through the flower market. Genie stopped to look at a stall full of roses. They were not the ruddy, gaudy kind of roses she remembered from the gardens at school, with the rudely glossy leaves, the blousy bosomy show roses in pinks and yellow which reminded her of the novelty soaps she used to collect: no, these were antique, puzzled-looking roses, their leaves smaller and darker – almost papery, almost dried. The blooms were strange muted colours, musky, dusky smoky, surly ashen pinks and dusty blues. She tugged at Paul's sleeve. He appeared not to see them. His face was gaunt. For a second he looked made-up: the smudges and hollows, the violet shadows. As though he were wearing make-up.

You took Ecstasy last night didn't you? Genie said.

Yep. I've been awake all night. Think I'm still tripping. You get this feeling when it's starting to wear off. It's like the feeling you get when you have a bath. It's almost too much at first, too hot, and then suddenly it's perfect, but that moment when it's just right never lasts long enough. It goes from being too much, to being perfect, to being not hot enough. And once you've noticed it starting to cool off you just know it's only going to get colder and there's nothing you can do and in the end all you can do is get out. Because you have to get out at some point.

(xii) Lost time

Two days after they had met up at The Dragon Bar, Genie found herself in a cab on the way to his place. Mini-cab drivers were always less interested in where she was going than in where she was *from*, she Genie. Their first guess was usually the place where *they* came from. They were usually wrong. And as the driver continued to list possible countries, Genie stared out at the dark streets, absently tracing a finger along the edge of the stains on the backseat, which formed a map of a world, great oceans lapping at the edges of continents. Then, as they passed through a road she suddenly recognised, she stopped him.

I'm from right here.

The house had been repainted since they lived there as kids, and there were thick, expensive-looking curtains pulled across the windows. The garden had been cleared of shrubs and was covered in gravel now, but the old black-and-white path remained the same, though it was more worn than she remembered it. There in the corner by the large bay window was where she had seen the daffodils. It was beginning to rain. Soon the rain was flattening the streets in ranks like an invading army. Genie ran the length of several leafy streets until, ten minutes later, she found herself outside Sol's place. She rang the bell several times but there was no answer. She had just given up and was walking away when the door opened behind her and light spilled into the street. Sol called out to her, rubbing his eyes.

Genie? What are you doing here? It's late.

She was surprised to find tears plopping down her cheeks. As they slid, hot and oily, down her face she remembered how she would always confuse the two phrases in French. *I rain*. It cries.

He looked closer at her.

Christ, you're fucked. It's pouring. Come in. I'll call you a cab.

She'd been looking for Paul, she told him, as he led her down to the kitchen. Looking for her lost hours. At the club. The Aquarium. Looking for her missing three hours. Her drowning self. Her goldfish memory. And she had found them: standing on the balcony, looking down at the dancers, taught and twangy and sharp as piano-wire, the bass like a cathode ray oscillator marking the peaks and troughs of her heart and brain waves oh and that's when she'd realised she'd found them, her missing three hours. This was where – this was how – she had lost her three hours the night

she'd lost Paul. She had lost those missing three hours being lost. But it was Paul who was really lost. Wasn't it always this way for him? Wasn't he always losing hours here and there on nights like these? Wasn't he always losing nights? And didn't those nights add up over time? As the numbers thinned out she saw more dancefloor than dancers. Mam had always liked to crowd her flowerbeds, she couldn't stand to see patches of earth around the plants. It looked skimpy, she told him. That was what a half-empty dancefloor looked like – a skimpily planted flowerbed. Paul had told her once about going to a club and losing his watch, she told Sol, the one she and Mam had given him for his 21st. He'd waited until the end of the night, until the dancefloor had cleared and then searched the floor for it. He had found his watch. He had found many watches.

As she had followed Sol through the hallway and down the stairs, Genie had felt uneasy. The shape of the house was at once familiar and not. And now, looking around the kitchen, she realised: this was the mirror image of 40 St George's Avenue. Everything here was on the wrong side. She took in her surroundings, the slick blonde floor, the shiny surfaces. She told him that their kitchen had been nothing like this. She told him about the heavy furniture, the grease-stained walls, the divan in the corner where Grandpère had slept. Genie told Sol about the time she'd been left with him, when Mam and Paul had gone to the launderette. Grandpère had asked her to switch off the television. The room had fallen quiet. Outside she could see the yard darken. Moss glowed on the dripping walls. Grandpère took up his drumsticks and tapped out this rhythm on the table. *Mu-mee da-dee, mu-mee da-dee.*

I felt really shy. I always did when he spoke to me in English. Then he played again. He handed me his sticks. They were the right size for him – they called him a *longuebigaille* (long, big, high) – but I was a five-year-old kid. I bashed the table. The sticks slipped out of my fingers. Grandpère snatched the sticks up from the floor and shouted at me. He played again. *Mu-mee da-dee, mu-mee da-dee.* He held the sticks so loosely that when he played, they looked rubbery in his hands but when he gave them to me I just held them rigid. Every time he shouted at me I held them tighter. He kept saying, *To pas pe cout moi, ta.* You're not listening to me. Then Mam came back with Paul. She told him to leave me alone. And Paul said, teach me, teach me. But Grandpère never did. He died not long after that. When he died, Grandmère said, *li'n pah mem ena couraz po twi li-mem.* He didn't even have the courage to kill himself.

Sol was watching Genie drink her tea, like a doctor watching a patient taking medicine. She drank it quickly, so that it burnt, then numbed her mouth.

Genie, what are you doing here?

She put down her cup. She took Sol's face in her hands and kissed him. He kissed her back at first in a slightly puzzled way, as though she were saying something he didn't quite understand, then pulled away.

I don't think...

She kissed him again.

Your mouth is hot, he said, whispering into it. And he kissed her back, as if, now, he understood.

She lay looking at him. The line of his lashes formed a clean curve, as though they had been drawn in with a hard pencil, but delicately. He opened his eyes and smiled, pulling her to him and kissing her, then muttering into her mouth.

This feels so *wrong*...

Genie felt a lurch in her groin then and slipped down under the blankets. He was hard and still sticky from earlier. His cock in her hand felt good, and she remembered how it was that first time, thinking then that it was like the satisfying grip she got on chunky crayons when she'd been a kid. And when she took him in her mouth he was sweet and hot and as she sucked he sighed in a way that made her heart twinge. He put his hands through her hair and when he came, he pulled at it. She wriggled up the bed and kissed him, stroking his face.

You look very white in the moonlight.

Yeah. Horrible. Not like you.

She got off on him being different to her, she said. Angled where she was curved, hard where she was soft. Pale to her dark. She could never have slept with a brown man. It would be like...

She laughed. He stroked her hair.

I think you were right, she said. Paul's in Mauritius. He must be. Eloise says she gave him money. That must have been what he wanted it for.

Maybe he needed it for something else, said Sol. Then he said quickly, But you're right. He always wanted to go back. Life's too complicated for him here. Don't you ever want to go back?

Mam always said it was a country that didn't like women. No, it's not my country at all. This is.

Then Sol told Genie about his friend, his friend who was always strange: he'd been strange as a child, he was strange at school, he was strange to his family and even when he grew up and his friends and family had all become used to him, he was still a stranger to them. But then he went to Japan, and in Japan he was not strange. They understood him there. He fell in love with a Japanese girl and married her and never left. Japan had been his home all along and he'd never known until he went there. Then again, he said, he knew some people from out of London who loved living in London because loved they loved this feeling of never feeling at home.

I would love to go to Mauritius, said Sol. What's it like?

I can tell you a story about it, if you like. The story of how me and Paul got our names.

Yes, said Sol, tell me.

(xiii) Paul and Virginie's story

A long time ago in Mauritius, when the island was still owned by the French, some fifty years or so before the French Revolution, there lived a young boy called Paul and a girl called Virginie. Raised as brother and sister, they fell in love, but alas, their love was doomed. I don't know if it's a true story or not. It's written as if it's true and something that happens in it – a shipwreck – is true. It's often presented as truth in Mauritius, in the same way that you can go to Verona and see Juliet's house and her balcony. This is what happens. Virginie's mother, pregnant with Virginie, leaves France with her new husband for a new life in Mauritius. Her noble family have rejected her for marrying a commoner so the young couple set out for the colonies where such things don't matter. They want to set up a plantation. The husband travels to Madagascar to buy slaves but while he's there, he gets a fever and dies. So Virginie's mum, pregnant and alone, unable to return to her hostile family, goes to hide herself away in a remote corner of the island. *Troubled souls often seek out the wilderness*. There's a lot of stuff like that in the book. About nature, and how it can soothe us. But in this wilderness she comes across another young woman who has also shunned society. Or rather, society has shunned her. Paul's mother, a simple peasant girl, who was abandoned by a rakish gentleman after she fell pregnant. He had no intention of honouring his promise to marry her. So, out of shame, she too sought out the wilderness and now she lived there, cultivating a piece of land she'd staked a claim to with the help of her two slaves, Domingue and Marie. The two women became friends and lived in adjoining huts, raising their children together, befriended by an old guy who lived nearby. In fact it's this old guy who tells the story. The story begins with someone out walking in the Mauritian wilderness when he sees the ruins of two small cottages. He wants to know what the story is, so he asks this old guy who happens to be passing by. And the old guy says, I know the story. It's very sad. It concerns two young people and their mothers...so then he pretty much says what I've just told you, and then the rest of the story. Anyway, this French guy was a hermit, having moved away from society for reasons of his own. So the little community living in their self-imposed exile was poor but contented, happy to let their lives follow the rhythms of nature. They grew such wonderful things on their plantation! Coconut trees and maize and tobacco and sweet potatoes and coffee and sugar cane and banana trees and cotton and pumpkins and cucumbers and custard

apples and mangoes and guavas and runner beans. And the children flourished too. They shared the same crib, their fat little arms entwined, their fat little cheeks pressed together. They bathed in the same pool, drank milk from the breast of the other's mother. If Paul was crying, Virginie was brought over to him to cheer him up. If Virginie was sad, Paul would try his best to make her smile again. Paul became a strong, handsome boy, responsible, brave and loyal. While Genie was beautiful, modest, demure, obedient, soft-hearted and hard-working. The two mothers dreamed of the day when their children would get married, and look after them in their old age. The family were only too happy to live outside a society which had rejected them, but of course they went to church, and on Sundays, did lots of good deeds for those who were less fortunate than they were. Visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and so on. One day, as Virgine was making the family lunch, a runaway slave-girl appeared at the doorway of her cottage. She had been hiding in the forest nearby and was starving. Virginie gave her the food, she'd been preparing then persuaded the slave to accompany her back to her cruel master. I will intercede for you, Virginie said. He will forgive you for running away and will not punish you. When Paul returned from chopping wood he escorted the two young girls through the forest, back to the plantation the slave had escaped from. The master, a big ugly white man, was enraged on seeing the slave-girl and was all set to punish her when Virginie interceded. The master took one look at her and suddenly begged for forgiveness, granting it also to his runaway slave. Whereupon Paul and Virginie ran away, into the forest, and headed for home. But they got lost. They wandered for miles, getting cut by brambles, tripping over tree roots and fighting their way through thick undergrowth. They came to a river which was so strong, Virginie was afraid to cross it, so Paul carried her across on his back, not in the slightest bit afraid to negotiate the slippery rocks, so dedicated was he to the task of keeping Virginie safe. They spent the night in the forest, but the next day, they were found by Fidele the family dog, who had accompanied Domingue on his search for the pair. But Virginie was in a state of collapse. Luckily, a band of *marrons*, or runaway slaves, who had witnessed Genie's kindness to the slavegirl, emerged from the bushes and helped to carry her home. There was much celebration and joy at their return. But after this time, things changed. An old aunt of Virginie's mother, bitter and alone but filthy rich, decided that she would make Virginie her heir. But Virginie must come to France to be educated and inducted in the ways of fine French society. Fearing for the future of the

young couple, who would only ever know poverty and hardship, Virginie's mother decided to send her to France in the hope of securing for her daughter some of the family money. This was a terrible decision. Virginie was desperately unhappy, and Paul filled with loneliness and rage and jealousy. Finally, the old aunt had had enough of Virginie, who was clearly pining for her island, her family and her Paul, and in a fit of bitterness decided to pack her off back home. But out of spite she insisted on Virginie travelling straight away, during the cyclone season – a very uncomfortable time to travel by ship. And a dangerous one too: when Virginie's ship weighed anchor just off the coast of Mauritius, Paul was beside himself with joy. But alas, the ship was caught in a storm and thrown onto the reef. Paul had to watch from the beach, powerless to help, while the ship was wrecked. Domingue and the old man were forced to restrain Paul from throwing himself into the sea to save Virginie, who was spotted on the prow, praying. A sailor insisted she remove her heavy clothes to save her from drowning, but she refused, out of the unnatural modesty learnt at her expensive convent school. She drowned. Pretty soon after that, they all died off of heartbreak – Virginie's mother, Paul, Paul's mother. Even the dog. But not the slaves, for some reason.

What she remembered was this. She remembered settling back into a low-slung sofa feeling like she was in an airport lounge. She felt prematurely exhausted, as though waiting for a long-haul flight home. She wasn't so sure this had been a good idea. What was she thinking? She'd asked what he wanted to do for his birthday and he'd said, Go clubbing. If we're doing that, she said, I'm going to take a pill with you. He was reluctant at first but she insisted. Fuck you, she'd thought. I'll do it. They might reconnect. She knew these things were supposed to open you up. But here she was, feeling very much closed down.

Paul said they were old-school ones, warm zingy, true – whatever true meant – and like the anxious believer she was Genie had swallowed it whole. Now here she sat with her mouth closed over her teeth because her teeth looked green, she was sure of it. His were – they were flashing as he gnashed on a tired piece of gum, grinning indiscriminately. She told herself it was just the light but it was an insidious kind of light that seemed to have no source. Genie stared up at the ceiling, trying to find it. Paul nudged her, sliding an arm along her shoulder.

You alright?

Yeah, fine.

Then feeling suddenly queasy she shook him off.

I'm just going to the loo.

She turned at the doorway and caught his eye, watching his face struggle to form an expression of concern.

The toilets were full of sweaty, swooning girls, limp as week-old lilies with the heat and drugs. Even the mirrors were sweating.

A large Nigerian woman sat fanning herself with a battered copy of OK! dealing imperiously with the girls who came to scrutinise the table of treasures over which she presided: half-empty perfume bottles, lipsticks, brushes, lollipops - all laid out like artefacts from a dig. Genie dropped some coins in the dish and took a red lipstick misshapen by a hundred mouths, trying it on in front of the mirror. It drove like a wonky dodgem and veered across her face. She rubbed the mark away with a piece of tissue and inspected the damage. It looked like she'd been slapped. Rubbing made it worse. She gave up, put the lipstick back and looked through the perfume.

Unable to choose, she picked a bottle at random and sprayed. The smell overwhelmed her and she ran to a sink and threw herself over it. The vomit came out in a satisfyingly clean motion, she thought, like film run backwards.

She rested her forehead against the mirror; it had the cold invasive touch of a speculum. Her face was pale but jammy around the mouth with lipstick. What a mess, she thought.

A girl filling a bottle up with water at the sink beside her asked if Genie was alright. Genie explained that she had never taken one of these things before. The girl, who on closer inspection was more of a woman really – certainly older than Genie herself – went soft-eyed.

Lucky you. Your first time. What did you take?

A pill.

I know that. I mean what kind.

A speckled one.

Never mind. Your first time, eh? Mine were doves.

Genie was pleased with the image: a speckled dove. The girl herself was soft and smoky-looking, plump-breasted like a wood pigeon.

Have you been sick, love? Do you feel OK now?

Genie nodded and closed her eyes tight as though inhaling deeply.

Ah, cooed the Pigeon, That'll be the smack in it.

Genie thought in a detached way that it must have started to work. The idea that she had ingested smack was not alarming as it should have been. And she was proved right when she finally left the toilets and a wave of clubbers broke around her and she was carried along the corridor and down the stairs, moving without resistance through the crowd, flowing down the stairs and into the basement dancefloor, where she found Paul. He was dancing. Genie tugged at his sleeve and he opened his eyes.

Genie!

He grinned down at her, ruffling her hair.

Coming up is an elegant way to describe it, Genie thought, the nausea quite gone now and her blood turning to something like honey as she locked onto the bassline, tripping up on the sneaky breakbeats, feeling for the spaces in between. It's like skipping with two ropes, she thought, like she used to do at school. She tugged at Paul's shirt, wanting to tell him she felt great but the words burst like bubbles in her mouth and Paul had his eyes closed, lost in it.

After a while, almost telepathically, they both edged towards the side of the dance-floor, to some sofas in the corner.

Genie quite liked the idea of a cigarette. She asked Paul for one and he offered her his crushed packet.

It's your last one.

We can share it, he said.

He lit up and passed it to her. She took a drag, the ashiness in her mouth almost savoury. Once, when she'd been trying to give up, she had switched from Silk Cut to Marlboro Reds. Instead of being repulsed for life as planned she had simply got used to the stronger taste. A residue of the repulsion factor remained and, if she thought about it, had probably become part of the pleasure of smoking for her now.

Are you feeling better? he asked.

Yeah, I was sick. But I'm okay now. It wasn't really like being sick. It felt quite nice actually.

The word she thought of was 'rinse'. It had felt as fresh and cleansing as rinsing her hair. She sighed contentedly, emitting a lazy smoke ring and passed Paul the remainder of the cigarette. He squeezed her arm; Paul, who had been so silent and moody lately. Now all that bad feeling had melted away. It felt right to talk to him.

You've seemed really distant lately –

But Paul was staring at something behind her.

Oh Christ...

Two ice sculptures sat on the bar, a male and female torso. The club was launching its own brand of water and the bar staff were pouring bottles of into the apparently hollow sculptures as clubbers queued to drink through the genitals. He was watching a girl with long red hair going down on the ice cock, giving it plenty of tongue.

I thought that was Eloise. He shook his head, as though trying to rid himself of the image.

Sort of thing she'd do.

They both laughed.

Just let me know if I'm cramping your style at any point, she said. You're a single man, remember.

What's the matter? Don't you like hanging out with your big brother?

It wasn't like Paul to be so sociable on pills. Not since the early days, anyway. She'd gone along to a couple of squat parties over the years to find him sitting in a corner somewhere. He seemed to like the experience of overloading himself and just sitting on his own, breathing. Absorbing himself in the pleasure of breathing in and out. If you thought too hard about breathing you might forget how to do it at all, like saying a word over and over again until it lost its meaning. But it was like her fifteenth birthday all over again. The jokiness, the lightness. Taking this pill was like travelling back in a time capsule. *Swallowing* a time capsule. She'd taken it because she wanted to talk to Paul, to feel close to him, to have him open up to her. She remembered a film they had watched together once: about a man's search for his girlfriend who'd disappeared suddenly when they'd stopped at a garage for petrol. After years of searching, her abductor had contacted him and agreed to meet up. On meeting, the abductor had said, If you want to know what happened to your girlfriend, take this. He'd had held out a pill which the boyfriend had taken. When he came to, he had found himself in a coffin.

Genie took a swig from Paul's water bottle which had obviously been emptied and re-filled several times. It was creased with tiny white scars where the plastic had stressed. Handing it back to him, she realised that her hand was damp, that the bottle was starting to leak. Or had she broken out in a sweat without realising it?

Genie?

She realised, as she caught him sneaking glances at her, that she probably looked uneasy. How long had she been drifting off like that? He was trying not to look concerned, she could see that, she could see that he didn't want to trigger anxiety in her but he'd seen her looking upset. Walking past the school chapel at night with Eloise had been like that too, past the two candles lit in perpetual vigil by the chapel doors, their flames rocking in a draught that threatened to blow them out, heralding the presence of the devil, flames that threw huge shadows which licked the walls and followed them along the corridor, Genie and Eloise not daring to look the other in the eye because of the fear that would spark up between them. Genie wanted to get away so that Paul wouldn't mirror and distort her mood into paranoia as he seemed to be doing now. Suddenly, she felt sick again.

I'm just going to be sick now.

Saying this in completely the wrong tone, it sounded to her as soon as she'd said it – too bright or too casual, like *I'm just going to buy some more cigarettes*, but

then she thought wildly, *What would be the right way to say it?* She couldn't remember how she would normally say it.

Shall I come with you?

Oh no – no – I'll be fine.

I'll just see you back here then.

She couldn't get away fast enough, pushing her way through the dancers, who didn't melt away this time but stood solid as pillars, blocking her way as she stumbled past the ice torsos on the bar, the ice cock sucked to a stump, leaking sadly.

The pigeon girl was still there, standing sentry beside the sinks, holding out an empty bottle under the taps which emitted only a fine, slow trickle.

You might as well just piss in it, Genie mumbled, but the girl ignored her; she was reassuring a freaked-out teenager with eyes like mirrorballs.

Don't worry love, just stay with me, you can have some of this water in a minute. This is your first one isn't it, love? Don't worry, you just have some of this water. It's coming on strong now but when it calms down you'll have the time of your fucking life, love. Just go with it. Go with it....

Genie watched her jaws working mechanically like an insect's. She didn't seem to recognise Genie. The nausea was quite violent now, each gag washing her mouth full of thin bitter bile that burnt the throat. It was getting harder and harder to hold back.

In the cubicle, she sat on the floor, cradling the toilet bowl. She wished Paul were there to hold her hair back.

She didn't know how long it was afterwards that she left the toilets, but when she managed to find the place where she'd left Paul, not daring to look into the faces of all these sweat-dripping freaks with eyes that wouldn't blink, staring at her as she pushed past, he had gone.

That was the last thing she remembered.

(xv) The Letter

It took Genie several minutes to realise where she was. The curtains were open. The bed made, the room iced over with moonlight. Paul's room. Dimly she became aware that she had been sleepwalking. She collapsed onto Paul's bed, pulled back the covers and crawled in. It still smelt of him.

She awoke before Mam. In the kitchen, she opened the dresser drawer and found a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. Genie went onto the balcony. Out here all you saw was a grid of other balconies, each filled with their individual combinations of washing and plants; toys and junk. But if you looked up you saw a stretch of skyline that took in Canary Wharf, St Paul's Cathedral, BT Tower and, if it was clear like today, the skeletal O of the London Eye. Genie took a cigarette from the packet and lit it. After a couple of puffs she stubbed it out in the dry earth of one of the potted geraniums Mam had put here, hoping to create a Parisian-style balcony, but the plants were dusty and stunted: the place was permanently covered in a fine grey soot, a kind of light ash that might have been sucked up from some volcano on another island and scattered in the wind to fall here, in Hackney. Pigeons nibbled through the netting which Mam had hung up to keep them out and, finding nothing of interest to them, expressed disgust by shitting all over the place like vandals or occupying soldiers. Mam had given up on the balcony now and tried instead to cultivate plants indoors: fake-looking things with waxy leaves; their soil spiked with plastic care-instructions like medical charts at the end of a hospital bed. Water sparingly. Needs constant attention.

Mam knocked on the window. She was holding up a letter. The address was handwritten, the stamp foreign. Genie did not recognise the writing.

Along with a short letter written on thin, lined paper, was a page from a book. It was a plate from *Paul et Virginie*. Genie recognised the image. Virginie stood on the prow of a ship, her eyes looking to Heaven, her hands clasped in prayer, her long fair hair whipped around her by a violent wind. The ship was caught on a reef; a tempest was raging. Paul, on the shore – once again, stripped to the waist – his face contorted in agony, was unable to reach her, restrained as he was by two men on either side of him, one old and white, one black and middle-aged, both struggling to hold him back from the waves. This plate, a companion to the one on Genie's wall,

must have been loosened when she removed *Crossing The Torrent*. The letter was from Paul's friend Gaetan.

I found this on the floor after you left. I do not know if you will come back to Mauritius, and if you do, whether you will visit me again. So I am returning this to you. It looks valuable. If you are reading this then I am happy, because you are safe in London, where you belong. I am worried about you in Rodrigues.

Mam did not like the idea at first.

Why should you go chasing halfway around the world for him? He left you alone when the ambulance came, Genie.

So Genie told Mam all that she had learnt about Paul those past few weeks. Mam went quiet. Then she agreed that it would not be impossible for Genie to find him. Rodrigues was tiny, after all. But after the cyclone it might well be chaos there. And it was not possible to go directly to Rodrigues from London. You could only reach it via Mauritius. Genie would have to fly there first. Come with me, Genie said. No, said Mam. It had been a mistake for her ever to have gone back in the first place, even if Genie had been the result of that time.

Someone once said that to love your country you must leave it, and I did. But I hated it when I went back. I can understand Paul wanting to go to Mauritius, said Mam. He seems to have some unfinished business there. But I don't know why he's gone running off to Rodrigues.

Troubled souls seek the wilderness, said Genie.

Paul

(i) Mauritius

On the 21st March 2003, twelve days after Cyclone Kalunde had skirted the island of Mauritius, the pilot announced that the plane would be landing there imminently. Paul looked out of the window. He noticed dark stains across the sea and took them for forests of coral or fields of seaweed. When he saw the same stains fall across the land he realised that these were the shadows of clouds. Even something as insubstantial as a cloud cast shadows. He hoped that he would leave it behind at last, this – this – *London* feeling which had driven him to leave. But when the plane touched down it came back: something panicky and fluttering inside him like a trapped moth. It's jet-lag, he told himself as he stepped off the plane, overwhelmed, the heat giving him that welcoming hug, so tight it brought tears to his eyes; the chill as he passed through the terminal, past reps with their crisp white shirts and their clipboards.

It's a just a hangover, he told himself as he left the building to be mugged again by the heat and a chaos of brown faces. He had not been in touch with Gaetan but even so from instinct he scanned the crowd for him. He saw nobody he recognised, though in each of those faces saw something half-familiar. That was how it felt to be in Mauritius again.

But he knew full well it was not jet-lag or whisky that had fogged him up. It was guilt. Shame. The pills. He should have flushed them away the night he'd left Genie, but he had not wanted to let them out of his sight, out of his control. While he still had them, they could not harm anyone. And after he'd held onto them for a while, he began to feel as though *they* wouldn't let *him* go. He had walked through customs, a nasty dark mist of a hangover beginning to descend from all the whisky he'd drunk, thinking, If I'm to be punished for what happened to Genie, let someone stop me. Let someone pull me over. Look through the bag. Open the tub of paracetamol. Take out one of the pills and notice the logo, call over a colleague. But no one had stopped him. He had walked through customs unchecked. He had managed to get away with it. With them.

(ii) 1975

The first time Paul flew in an aeroplane, he was four years old. He was travelling with Mam to Mauritius, to stay with Mam's new husband Serge. Paul had met Serge before, in London. He was dark, blue-black dark like a prune. His hair stood out from his head in wild curls. The whole of him was a gravitational force. He had made the world spin for Paul, the way he picked him up and swung him around, hoisting Paul onto his shoulders or tipping him upside down until he was screaming and red-faced, with excitement or fear he didn't know, until Serge set him upright, the world still turning and churning with the pull of water being sucked down a plughole.

As the plane banked, Mam nudged him. He looked out of the window to see a sudden sweep of bay, a shy sort of turquoise. The beach stretched further than he could see.

That's Mauritius, Mam said.

But the beach, whenever they went, was never as nice as it had looked from the plane. The sand was soft, but littered with pieces of bleached coral, hard as bone, some shaped liked the skulls of small mammals. And half-buried in the sand were sharp bits of shell, smashed up by the sea, and the spiny needles and tiny cone-like seeds shed by the filao trees which bordered the beach. They hurt his feet. The sky was full of clouds, the sun squinted and the sea was not at all the easy blue it had seemed from the plane. Paul preferred the garden. He liked to rub his hands on the squat palms, whose trunks felt like they had been knitted from some thick yarn. He liked the citrus colours of the hibiscus flowers, the steaming, early morning grass. But what Paul liked best about the garden was the fruit on the trees.

It was the first time he'd seen fruit on trees: lemons or mangoes or lychees. It was like something out of a cartoon, something magical. And then it turned into a kind of mania for him, so that every time he passed a tree or a bush he would peer into its foliage, try to look beyond the shadows and the leaves to see what fruits were hanging there. He was always convinced there *would* be fruit, though he was too small to reach, so he would ask Jean-Marie to help. Jean-Marie was Serge's son. His sort-of brother. But Jean-Marie was older than Paul. Almost a man. Jean-Marie would part the leaves for him and pick whatever he found. Sometimes these were fruit Paul didn't recognise – misshapen or an ugly colour but they tasted surprisingly sweet or

creamy, or musty and complicated, like no fruit he had eaten before. Jean-Marie would cut them open just in case – thrillingly enough – there were *bebetes*, or insects inside, holding out a slice on the blade of his pocket-knife. Sometimes, there was no fruit at all.

Paul spent a lot of time in the garden, playing alone. And then one day, Paul was called into the house. Mam was cradling a baby. Its tiny arms waggled randomly like the antennae of an insect. *Bebete*, Paul said. Serge slapped him round the head. Genie was to be the cause of many slaps to Paul's head.

Life changed when Genie was born. And because life changed, Mam took Paul and Genie back to London. So you could say Genie was the reason they had to leave Mauritius. The moment life changed was the day Paul found a snake in the garden. He ran screaming into the house. But when Serge came out to see for himself, he whisked Paul up and swung him around and laughed because it was not a snake, it was a *coulevre*, which meant good luck. He was going to the races that day. So he took Paul with him, heaving him up onto his shoulders so he could see the horses better. Paul screamed and screamed for their horses to win but none of them did. After the races were over, everyone drifted away and Paul helped Serge to pick through all the discarded betting slips which littered the ground, looking for winners which might have been dropped by mistake.

Mam seemed to know as soon as they walked in that Serge hadn't won. She said in a sharp voice that the *coulevre* was not lucky after all and Serge tried to laugh and said, Why maybe it was. Maybe he would have lost more if Paul hadn't seen the *coulevre*. But Mam didn't laugh. She said, Gambling is the opposite to work and Serge swore and threw some coins at her. Paul rushed to pick them up, anxiously, not wanting things to be all over the place like that.

But sometimes, Serge won. Then he would buy things. One time he bought chickens, and a cockerel, Milord, which would wake them with his crowing. He was fiercely territorial, Milord. Whenever they had to pass him in his patch of yard, he would run for them, his sharp beak pecking at the air, hoping to strike an ankle. Once he caught Paul, though Serge dismissed the injury saying that Paul should leave the poor bird alone. Paul got angry then, saying that the cock had attacked him and later that night, Paul had a nightmare about Milord. He and Genie slept in a bed together in a curtained-off area of the front room, and as he thrashed and screamed, Mam came

rushing to the bed and shook him out of it. Paul mumbled, turned over, and fell into a deep sleep. The next day when Genie woke up, Mam burst out crying. Genie's face was covered in bruises. Paul looked shocked and impressed that he had caused her so much damage. It's all Milord's fault, he muttered, but Serge did not agree and gave Paul a thrashing.

Jean-Marie did not intervene, but later that day, when they went out into the yard, Milord was gone. For dinner that night they ate *carri coq*. Paul refused to eat it. Serge made him stay at the table until his plate was cleared but Paul ignored him, tears rolling down his face. Mam got angry then and had a row with Serge which only ended when Paul bent his head to his plate, gagging slightly as he ate, the tears rolling quickly, plopping from his chin into his food.

After that, whenever they fought, Paul would run out into the garden. There was a hole in the garden wall. He put his eye to it. He saw the street dogs and the street children, he saw goats being herded past. He saw Jean-Marie's friend, Maja. Maja came towards the wall, unzipping his pants, and poked his willy through it.

Touch it! he ordered.

Paul put his finger out and touched him. Then Maja laughed and ran away.

And once Paul saw a funeral procession, the mourners in black, wailing, eyes rolled into their heads.

When Paul was older, he would stay out in the street long after his schoolfriends had gone home. Or he would go to the garage where Jean-Marie worked. Jean-Marie let Paul help him when he worked on his motorcycle, teaching him the names of all the parts and tools. Paul loved the way Jean-Marie spoke to him when they were working together, asking him to pass this or that in a business-like manner, speaking to him as though he were an adult, an equal, as though he really were of use. Not like Maja, who seemed to treat Paul as though he were in the way, and gave him a nasty nickname, *Caca Ti Baba* – Little Baby Shit. Back at home, Jean-Marie had a talent for disappearing just before Mam and Serge started fighting, like a dog that could feel a storm coming. You only knew he was gone when you heard the sound of his motorcycle starting up, then it faded away and that always sounded sad to Paul, like someone saying goodbye. Sometimes Paul would run down the road after him.

In the end they left Mauritius because of some cakes. Mme Blondel next door gave Genie a bag of Neapolitans – little jam-sandwiched cakes with pink icing she made for weddings or christenings. When Genie took the bag home and showed Mam, Mam got angry and took it from her. Mam didn't like the neighbours, she said. They didn't like her. And then when Serge came home and Genie told him that Mam had taken her cakes, Serge got angry. He slapped Mam and left the house, slamming the door in an echo of that slap and leaving Mam to slide down the wall, the way shadows did, weeping bitterly, the cakes rolling about her on the floor.

Jean-Marie drove them to the airport in a car borrowed from the garage while Serge sat in the back in between Paul and Genie. He kept up a constant stream of jokes, tweaking Paul's cheek, hauling Genie onto his lap and hugging her so tightly she struggled to be released. So he loosened his grip and let her climb off.

When they walked through the departures gate, Paul was almost walking backwards, waving and waving until he had to turn out of sight because Mam, who was striding ahead, pulling Genie, had stopped to scold him. They would miss their flight.

By the time they left Mauritius, Paul was speaking Creole. But back in London, Mam insisted he spoke only English. So he wouldn't get confused, Mam said. Soon he had forgotten his Creole. But for a long time after that, he still dreamt in it.

(iii) Looking for Gaetan

He got into a taxi and asked the driver to take him to Le Morne. Driving along narrow roads shuttered by dense walls of cane, Paul was struck by his strange familiarity with this landscape too. Nothing here seemed foreign: not the cane fields, the red earth, the book-shaped eruptions of rock. But still, that uneasiness. When they passed a sign for Le Souffler, he asked the driver to stop off. The sea air and the salt spray might clear his head. They turned off onto a dirt track, through coconut groves and a field full of cows that looked leaner, dustier than English cows, and stopped before the cliffs.

Le Souffleur, The Whistler, didn't *souffle* anymore. This rock in the sea was so shaped that when waves rushed through it, a whistling sound was heard. So he'd been told. But the forces which shaped the rock had eroded it further so that it was silent now as all rocks were, and eventually the rock would disappear, as all rocks eventually would.

Not like England here, is it?

The driver, stocky and dark-skinned, had the menacing look common to well-built men with long eyelashes – so long, in his case, they looked frilly. His attempt at conversation sounded more like a threat: he'd had to bellow over the roar of the sea and the smashing of it up against the rocks. No, it wasn't like England here but it was always the smallest differences which made Mauritius feel foreign to Paul: the rollers, the rocks, the cliffs, could have been Cornwall but if you looked at the grass, you saw the blades were much coarser than English grass. A couple had gone missing there recently, the driver said. It was rumoured to be a double suicide but no bodies had been found. And no wonder, Paul thought. Perhaps it was possible to disappear completely, after all. Your bones would be ground up like the rocks were, into sand.

They drove away, the sky pale and complicated with cloud which was the grey of something that had once been white. The sea was a tingling blue and the foam so bright it made the clouds look even dingier. What a triumph of Earth over Heaven, Paul thought, half-remembering some story. They continued along the coastal road, along shallow beaches where women waded into the water up to their calves, holding skirts with one hand and sieves in the other, which they dipped in the sea, then shook, sifting through what was left. Further on, by Pomponette, he watched a group of schoolboys, skin blackened by the sun, running into the sea in their underpants.

When they reached Le Morne the driver asked for directions.

Just drop me off here, Paul said, indicating the empty beach.

Here?

Paul made a joke about needing some time alone before seeing family but the driver did not understand and took his tip, unsmiling, and drove away. It wasn't quite a lie. Gaetan was the nearest thing he had to family on this island.

This was the beach where they'd first met. Paul, Jean-Marie, Maja and the others had gone down to visit him. Gaetan was not really part of their crew: he was a surfer and had his own friends. And he was a country boy after all, living quietly by the sea. But he was a cousin of one the others and Jean-Marie had always liked him. They'd turned up hoping to snaffle some of his catch and cook it up on the beach. They were in luck – he had a couple of fish left unsold and was happy to exchange them for some beer and *ganja*. Gaetan had built up the fire himself and sat tending it, sitting apart from the rest of them, smiling shyly at Paul now and then.

You see how different these country people are to you and me? Maja had whispered and Paul felt uncomfortable even then with the conspiratorial way in which he spoke. He did not like Maja implying that he and Paul thought the same way. He soon came to realise that Gaetan's silence and his distant smile were typical of the fishermen here. As though they spent too long staring out at sea.

The sea was dangerous at this most south-westerly point of the island. There was a reef which broke the force of the waves before they hit the shore but it was not far out at all and if you went into the water, you felt the current drag you in directions you didn't want to go. You'd see the odd surfer here, and when they came out blood would be streaming down their legs where they'd been cut up by the reef. As he sat sifting handfuls of the coarse yellow sand through his fingers, staring at the waves rolling in, sometimes several on top of one another, he saw a *pirogue* come in, appearing as if from nowhere. A long thin figure stood punting it with slow strokes. A large fish hung over the side, but as the boat came closer Paul realised that what he could see was not the body of a fish but the tail of a shark. The fisherman brought his boat ashore and Paul wandered over to get a better look. Up close he could see that it was a small one, but it must have been an adult: its fins were battered and chipped and its body was scarred. It lay on its side, its glassy eye looking oddly alert.

Where did you get that?

The fisherman smiled and jerked his thumb behind him.

Out there. Past the reef.

What are you going to do with it?

Sell it to La Berjaya, he said, using his thumb and a finger to say 'money'.

It was the biggest hotel in that area. Gaetan worked there in between fishing trips, playing with the segatier and a troupe of dancers at their weekly show.

Do you know Gaetan Lavoillas?

Oh Gaetan, the fisherman shrugged disdainfully. Paul realised that he was younger than he'd first taken him for.

You'll find him outside the shop.

Then he heaved the shark onto his bony shoulder and, swaggering under the weight of it, walked up the beach, onto the road. Only then did Paul realise that he had not even considered that Gaetan might not be around here any more. It had been thirteen years. But Gaetan would not have forgotten him. Though Gaetan might well have thought Paul had forgotten him. He remembered with a sting of shame the letter he had never replied to. The fact that he had lost it, and the address, was no excuse: a letter addressed to *Gaetan Levallois, Grand Gaube, Le Morne*, would have reached him. But the truth was, back in London, Paul felt he had nothing to say. To him or to any of Jean-Marie's friends or cousins out there. He had come to realise it was nothing to do with what had happened to Jean-Marie. No. It was to do with him. And London.

Paul stayed a while to watch the setting sun bloody the sea, and then after the first stars had come out, he brushed himself down and set off for the village. On the road, Paul passed a stall where a woman stood hacking steaks from a big fish, weighing them on bloody scales. He nodded to her and she nodded back in the serious, almost formal way of country people here, who were wary of strangers. She directed him to the village, which wasn't much of a village, just a cement-block shop and a row of *la cas tolle*, shacks of corrugated iron, some carefully painted and set in plots of well-tended land. Where the panels had been left unpainted you could see faded letters indicating former use; construction site fencing, mainly. A few men were squatting outside the shop, chatting and passing a bottle of beer between them. One of them was the young fisherman who had caught the shark. Paul raised a hand in greeting but he turned away and nudged one of the others. It was Gaetan.

Caca Ti Baba!

He gave Paul the greeting he'd hoped for – the old nickname, the big hug, the slap on the back, Gaetan taking Paul by the shoulders and examining him to see if he was still there, the Paul he knew, though Paul had been so young then. And perhaps this examination was a way to stop Paul from looking too closely at *him*.

(iv) 1988 – Part One

Whenever Paul remembered that time in Mauritius, it seemed to him that he and the others were always looking for something – *ganja* or transport or beers or money or batteries or a radio station playing good seggae or sometimes, just one of the others. So the day Jean-Marie's cousin got his truck everything changed: one less thing to look for, something to help them go looking for everything else they needed. And if it hadn't been for that bit of good fortune, the fight with Maja might not have happened and the best six months of Paul's life might never have ended.

It was a Saturday, the week before Paul's 17th birthday, when Claude got the truck. Paul and Jean-Marie and the others were helping Tilamain manoeuvre a large sheet of zinc onto the roof of his parents' house. Most of the roofs here in Pointe aux Sables were flat and looked unfinished with rods poking up out of the cement, left like that to give their owners the option of extending upwards, of building another floor when more money was available, or grown-up children got married and needed their own home. But then there were some newer houses, built with pointed roofs in the Western style. What a statement, Paul thought: that one had reached one's potential for growth or improvement.

The job took longer than it should have done; there was a lot of standing about and shouting as everyone argued the case for doing it their way. But now it was done and work was finished for the day. Tilamain left to get them more beers while they sat around sharing the one bottle left over from the previous night. When Maja reached for it and took the first swig, he almost spat it out again. Beer frothed at his mouth.

If I'd wanted a hot drink I would've had tea.

Jean-Marie laughed, took the bottle from him, and drank from it.

If we'd done things my way we would have finished quicker and this wouldn't have had time to sit there sunbathing...

It was Paul's favourite time of day, late in the afternoon, just around sunset. Pointe aux Sables being on the West Coast meant they got the full force of it here. If you sat on the terrace downstairs, you couldn't see the sun setting: just the high garden wall and the trees and the sky above you but that was what he liked: he liked the way the sky turned a funny colour, turned everything a funny colour, though you couldn't see the source of the light. The whole place was lit up in such a strange way

it felt like something terrible was about to happen. But it never did: the day ended and night fell. That was all.

Maja took a spent match from the floor and started to prod at a millipede crawling by his flip-flop. It avoided his attentions, executed an elegant feint and rippled away. He flicked the match at it in disgust. Paul was still looking at the millipede – impressed by its economy of movement – when he heard a van pull up outside the house. An unfamiliar horn sounded, then Tilamain called out to them. Maja being closest to the edge of the roof, looked down.

Well, fuck me! Claude's got his *transporte*!

Most of Jean-Marie's gang, his friends and cousins, had two names: their birth name and another acquired once people had worked out who or what he was. There was Jean-Marie's cousin Claude who was occasionally known as Chauffeur, because he was a bus driver. Then London because he had once visited the city and talked of it often (Where did you stay? Paul had asked, and London, raising bulging eyes to the sky, said dreamily, Croydon...) or Tilamain because he was born with an unformed hand. And Jean-Marie was sometimes known as Zamblon because he was as purple-dark and neatly-made as the fruit itself, and, Paul secretly thought, that his personality had a sharp, complicated flavour too. They liked to complicate the flavours of their fruit, these Mauritians: if you stopped on the street at a bike-kiosk – a glass case attached to the back of a moped, the case stuffed with *zamblon*, *gouave de chine*, slices of small Victoria pineapple – you were offered with your fruit a twist of paper filled with pinkish powder, like sherbet, to dip it into. It wasn't sherbet though but *piment du sel* - a mix of chilli powder and salt.

And then there was Maja, Jean-Marie's best friend, his self-professed blood brother. 'Maja' meant 'crazy fun'.

Maja had moved in with Jean-Marie and his father, not long after Mam had taken Genie and him back to London. He had come over from the Chagos Islands with his family as a kid (Maja telling Paul with some bitterness, a second-hand bitterness, how the British Government, *your* government, had brushed them off their island like so many crumbs and tipped them into the dustbin that was Mauritius). It seemed the family had never recovered from that forced exile. When as a teenager, Maja had hit a bad patch with his mother – his father long since dead – Jean-Marie invited him home for dinner. And Maja never left. He was like the dogs you found

there, the dogs who hung out on street corners during the day and had no fixed address, finding dinner and a corner for the night with any of the local families who had so many dogs of their own that they wouldn't notice one more.

When Paul, aged sixteen-and-a half, took money from Grandmère under false pretences to come back to Mauritius, it was with Jean-Marie and Maja that he stayed with. Maja had felt obliged to give up his room for Paul. On his first night, Paul lay in bed and looked up at a framed photo on the wall, like an icon, of Jean-Marie making his First Holy Communion, unable to sleep for the heat which pressed down on him like another's body, and the sly whine of mosquitoes zipping in and out of earshot, then the needling and him scratching at his bites until his nails had grated away the top layer of skin and all that was left was a burning and blood and an archipelago of raw bites. In the morning he woke up and examined the window, which was open but covered with netting. A patch of the netting had been carefully peeled away from the window.

Claude had a brother in France who had lent him the money to set up a business. Claude wasn't sure yet what kind of business it should be but the one thing on which everyone agreed was that Claude could not go wrong if he got himself a van. A van was useful for any kind of business. And that day he'd bought himself a sweet little Toyota flat-bed truck second-hand from a guy in Port Louis. It was in good nick – only 2 years old with 60,000 kms on the clock and a decent stereo. It was smart too: glossy black paintwork and an aquamarine trim.

They circled it, squatting down to examine the tires, rapping a couple of times on the body to check out how it sounded. They smiled at each other in approval, though only Jean-Marie was a mechanic. Then they unhooked the tail of the truck and sat on it. They peered through the open window into the driver's cabin and turned up the volume on the stereo. And then Maja said,

So where are you taking us? They all piled in: Jean-Marie riding gunshot, Paul squeezed in the back seat between Tilamain and his brother. London and Maja sat on the flat-bed, arms hanging over the side. London seemed to like it out there: head hung back, eyes closed, hair dancing in the breeze. He reminded Paul of those long-eared dogs you saw in cars sometimes, their heads poking out of the passenger-seat window and their ears streaming behind in the wind like long tresses – London had the same stupid look of contentment on his broad dark face. With Maja, it was different. He could have been on a bus: he looked impatient to get to wherever it was

they would end up. Paul had been out there for five months already, but still he took delight in the way that all the little shops, the snack shacks, the lovingly painted signs, the bushes of bougainvillea, like squashed-up boxy Chinese lanterns, in every kind of lipstick colour, the mixed look of the people, seemed new or different and told him that he was in Mauritius, at last. In years to come, Paul would realise that like Maja and his family, he had never recovered from that forced exile.

Claude slammed the hooter whenever he passed a fine arse and long legs, or a head of long silky hair. They barely glimpsed faces, he drove that fast. Paul was sorry he wasn't sitting by one of the windows, so he could lose himself in the view, so he could feel as though what rolled past his window was a film, with the car stereo as a soundtrack. They were listening to Claude's cassette of The Police and the music seemed just right to Paul: it was nostalgic music, music from almost another time that reminded the others of their first youth, but he was not quite seventeen and had no real memory of it. It was so Western, that sound, pulling him in another direction, which is the way he thought he liked things best then, being slightly outside of the situation. They drove down to Tamarin to score some *ganja*. Claude dropping Paul and Jean-Marie off, while the others went on to the beach.

The dealer was a rich *blanc*, whose father was a lawyer for one of the big sugar companies. As they entered the café, Paul spotted him immediately, saw him draw back a little, saw him notice that Paul wasn't Mauritian, the way everyone seemed to know though how, Paul couldn't tell. And perhaps that was the position of the foreigner, Paul thought, never quite understanding what it was about him that marked him out as foreign.

Are you French? the *marchand* asked, in French.

I'm English, Paul replied, in Creole.

And so they chatted in Creole for a bit about England, its football teams, its weather. Marcel – that was his name – asked if Paul was a student. Paul replied that he was not. He'd left school, he said, and now had wanted to get to know Mauritius a bit.

And you? Paul asked.

Me? I'm a fisherman.

Paul must have given him a funny look, Marcel must have seen him take in the white-gold skin, the designer surf t-shirt and slack unmuscle arms because he added,

A planter too. Also, I make things out of shells.

Nice life. Paul said.

Yeah, Marcel said.

It would kill him to work in an office. Wearing a suit and tie and all that.

Every time he put on a tie – for weddings or funerals or whatever – he thought he was going to choke.

What do you plant? Paul asked. But Marcel and Jean-Marie only laughed.

On their way back to the beach to hook up with the others Paul said,

That bloke. He didn't seem like a fisherman to me.

What he meant was that he was surprised a rich white man would choose to make a living that way.

Fisherman? said Jean-Marie. All that guy fishes for is money from his mother's handbag. He's not doing anything with his life except waiting for his parents to die.

It's still odd to me, Paul said, hearing a white guy speak Creole.

Well he's Mauritian, shrugged Jean-Marie. But his first language would be French. That's what he'd speak at home. Guys like that, he said, they're the first to pick up all the new slang in Creole. Guys like that say *mari* and *boug-la* a lot. He's a cunt. He and his brother. They're always having run-ins with Gaetan's lot. Surf business, don't ask me. Turf wars over this place. His weed is good though.

Gaetan was there, with his surfer friends. And there, on the beach, through a rain so fine it looked like smoke, the moonlight was almost blue. You saw the sea stretch out to the west but then – how could he explain this? – it just stopped. There must have been a mist down but you couldn't tell, you couldn't see anything. It looked like the end of the world, Paul said.

Like an apocalypse? Claude asked, passing him the joint. Paul took another warm lungful.

No, Paul said, almost sighing as he exhaled, Like the world ends here.

But it didn't end there. It ended – for Jean-Marie, at least, and in many ways for Paul – a week later.

(v) A Box of Taps

Gaetan lived in the same place, a *la cas tolle* set back from the road. But when he swung open the door – it was unlocked - Paul was shocked at the state of the place. The bed was unmade, the floor littered with old Turf Reports and dirty plates, these last beaded with flies. Unwashed clothes hung limp from the back of the only chair. Some of the weave had come loose from its seat and stuck out untidily like stray hairs. Gaetan waved an arm about the place,

Nothing's changed. He smiled, slightly embarrassed.

Gaetan was well past forty now but looked older. His hair had mostly gone and what was left was grey and bristled. The whites of his eyes were flecked with blood. His Manchester United shirt was streaked with something and he smelt of last night's drink.

Those horses you used to back – are they still running? Paul laughed, nudging with his foot a heap of betting slips on the floor. They rested on a pile of coins and crumpled tissues, the contents of a turned-out pocket. Paul put the bottle of *Le Corsaire*, which looked dark and treacly, on the table, prompting Gaetan to disappear behind a curtain into the kitchen area.

There was a calendar on the wall above the bed, the kind that might come free with a Sunday supplement. The page was turned to January. January of the previous year, Paul noticed. It showed pictures of big grey Gothic buildings.

Where's this? he asked.

Helsinki.

Why have you got this up?

I don't know, Gaetan shrugged. He had returned with two glasses and a bowl of peanuts in their shells. It looks really foreign. *Cold*.

Paul knew then he didn't need to ask if Gaetan had ever managed to leave the island.

A tourist gave it to me.

Are you still at Le Berjaya, Paul asked.

Sort of.

Gaetan nodded towards the chair, which Paul took, while he himself settled down on the bed. He opened the rum and poured out two large measures. They clinked glasses and drank.

So, said Gaetan, wiping his mouth with the back of a hand and looking Paul full in the eyes, making it sound almost like an accusation,

Where have you been all this time? What are you doing back here?

It was a shock to hear roosters again. There was one in the neighbouring yard. Paul woke up terrified when he heard it – that raw sound, its voice almost straining, breaking his sleep, a rude awakening, and then the dogs started, and it was over – sleep was over for the night, if it had ever been possible at all. He had dreamt of Jean-Marie. That was the last thing he remembered talking to Gaetan about, before he'd passed out. Gaetan had given up the bed for him. He lay snoring on the floor, the smell of stale alcohol rolling off him in waves. Paul stepped over him, and went into the kitchen area. Gaetan was a big drinker now, it seemed. The night before, they had worked their way through bottles of rum, Gaetan tossing back most of it like it was lemonade. Paul filled a pan with water and put it on the stove to boil. Walking out into the yard, he felt a freshness coming in from the sea. It was half-dark outside, the sky a faint sort of lilac, still scattered with stars, and over on the beach he could see the silhouettes of fishermen arranging their nets, dragging their *pirogues* down to the water. He felt a twinge of nostalgia for the times he'd gone out there with Gaetan. When he'd asked Gaetan about the *pirogue*, he just shrugged and said he'd lost the taste for being out at sea.

Paul went back inside and made himself a cup of vanilla tea. He heard Gaetan smacking his lips, saw him stretch.

You want some tea?

Is there any of that rum left?

I'll get it out of you eventually. Gaetan smiled. They were drinking again, sitting in front of the television.

I told you, said Paul. I'm here on holiday.

But why come back *now*? Yes, you tell me you have some money now. But forgive me, he said, looking Paul up and down, You don't *look* very well off to me. You've got holes in your jeans...

That's the fashion in London.

He explained how in London, the richer you were, the poorer you dressed.

That's crazy! exclaimed Gaetan What's the point of having money and dressing like a bum? You must be rolling in it, in that case...but how did you make your money?

Paul was spared the awkwardness of dealing with that question when a newsflash came on.

There were scenes of mass looting in Baghdad, and the storming of Saddam Hussein's Palace. A man carrying a vase and fake flowers half the size of himself ran into shot, looking delirious. Gaetan laughed.

What's he going to do with those?

On the local news there was an update on the progress of a young Muslim girl who had taken poison, insect repellent, for some hazy romantic reason. She had burnt her insides with the stuff but was lingering on.

Sometimes, said Gaetan, We get news about London. Do you get news about Mauritius in London?

Sometimes, said Paul feeling guilty.

Then Gaetan mentioned the riots in Port Louis.

You must have heard about them.

Remind me.

Four years previously, Gaetan told him, there had been a pro-*ganja* rally in the capital, calling for de-criminalisation of the drug. The Creoles who followed Rastafarianism were chief among those demonstrating, led by Kaya, the famous seggae star. He had been arrested for smoking ganja. Three days later, he had died in police custody. Head injuries. He'd fallen, apparently. Weeks of rioting followed. A state of emergency was called.

Did you get involved?

No, said Gaetan. I wasn't around. I didn't even make it to the demonstration.

He looked evasive.

But London, Claude, Tilamain, they were all there. They even went looting. Tilamain grabbed this massive box. It was heavy and hard to carry, what with his hand, you know. There were some *gardes* on his ass so he had to hide it in some bushes and go back for it the next day. He didn't even know what he'd nicked until he opened the box.

And what did he get?

A box of taps.

Paul laughed. Gaetan looked annoyed.

Taps are expensive. He managed to sell them for 30 rupees a piece.

Gaetan shook his head and threw back his drink and as he did so Paul could see his eyes flickering the way they did whenever he was rummaging through his memory for a story. But this time, it was not a story. It was an accusation.

You think that's funny? A box of taps? What do you know? I wish I had been there. You know London got beaten up by the *gardes*? I should have been there. But you want to know why I wasn't there? Well let me tell you.

(vi) Gaetan's Story

I can see it on your face. Ever since you came here, this question, stuck like a fishbone in your throat: What happened to you? Well, I'll tell you. It's not a happy story, brother. I had a pretty nice life when you knew me before. I had my boat. My friends. We'd surf, we'd smoke weed on the beach, meet with girls. And I had my music, my seggae. Playing at Bergaya. But over the years, it all changed. And then I went to prison. Did you know that? No, you wouldn't. How would you? You never wrote to anyone. I sent you a letter and you never wrote back. That London fog. Fogging up your head. You forgot about us. Well, it all started to fall apart not long after you left Mauritius. In the end I lost my boat. I went to prison. And I lost my job at the Berjaya. Oh yes, I'm back there now, but I don't play music any more. Lost my job there a few years ago. Then I did a favour for one of the managers. He said he could get me work there again. But only behind the scenes. I had a reputation. I couldn't play music for the guests any more. So now I clean their rooms. Sometimes, if people leave stuff behind, I keep it. Just stuff no one would ever notice. Yeah, like that calendar. I know it's out of date. How you're looking at me now, it's different to how you used to look at me. Back when you came here. You were, what, seventeen? When I was that age, younger even, I used to surf. Tamarin. I met up with you guys there one night, remember? Jacques who has the hostel there now – me and him and a bunch of friends, we used to surf that spot. Beautiful wave. A perfect curl. And it seemed to us at the time that our wave would just appear on demand. We'd grab our boards and get out there. And being on the West of the island, the evenings were best. Riding that endless glassy left as the sun was setting. Man, it was good for the soul. That was back when there were no tourists. There weren't many of us then. We had that wave to ourselves. Then one day a small group of foreigners appear. Five American guys. They were surfers. They were making a film about surfing. One of their friends had told them about Tamarin so they'd come to see it for themselves. Some of us were suspicious at first. But we smoked weed with them and they told us about the film. They were cool guys. Real surfers. They wanted to show something of the spirit of surfing, how it was about being in tune with nature and the people you met on your search for waves. They had travelled all over the world and had never found a wave like ours. So they hung out there for half a year and we shared our wave, our weed, with them. Those were good times. And then the film came out.

Gradually, more surfers came to see Tamarin for themselves. Australians, South Africans. A few Americans. Even then, it was still cool. They had that spirit. That surfer's spirit. We never had a problem with them. To come all the way out here, just to ride our wave, well, we were honoured. And they knew to share it, to show some respect. But something changed. We started getting more tourists to Mauritius. And some of them wanted to surf. They weren't the kind of surfer we'd known before. They turned up in all the latest gear – gear! There was never *gear* before! We just rode on boards we'd made ourselves. These arseholes dropped in on your wave, they didn't know how to behave. And then the *blancs* moved in. The kind who'd never been interested in surfing before. But suddenly, they started showing up on the beach, pushing everyone around. Not so much us – the original crew – they would never have dared. Just all the tourists. We didn't like that. But over the years, the strangest thing. The wave changed. It stopped showing up as often. Changes in the weather, the form of the ocean floor. I don't know. The sands just shifted. Maybe the sea could sense all this bad feeling and was starting to retreat. Fewer waves. More surfers. Bad attitude. It started getting nasty. Do you remember that *blanc* fuck you bought your weed off when we were in Tamarin that night? The rich boy? Well his brother thought he was a big surfer. Those two had some nasty friends. These were the nastiest of the *blancs* surfers down at Tamarin. They called themselves the White Shorts. They told everyone they owned the wave. How can you own a wave! They used to paddle out with knives taped to the underside of their boards. Flash them in people's faces. Some of my boys had run-ins with them but not me. I'd stopped surfing that spot. Before this all happened I had only ever surfed Le Morne and One Eye a couple of times but after the scene turned bad at Tamarin I started going out there more often. I was never really comfortable on reef breaks. You've been out with me on my *pirogue*. You've seen what a wave can be. You know about the sharks. But eventually I started surfing those spots because there was no where else to go. It wasn't the same. Then after Jean Marie died something strange happened. I got the fear. I lost my nerve and got ground up on the reef a few times. I surfed less and less and eventually stopped altogether. I smoked more weed. Started drinking. Over the years I got into the horses. Cards too. I lost the boat. And then one day something happened and I realised that this turf war over the Tamarin spot *was* my fight after all.

Do you remember the anniversary of Jean-Marie's death? Do you mark it? I do. On that day I get especially drunk. And each year, the drinking goes on for longer

and longer. The day of Kaya's pro-*ganja* rally, I had pretty much been drunk for three weeks straight since Jean-Marie's anniversary. I told you before that I missed the rally. Well this is why. That morning, just before we were due to join the others, I had gone up to Port Louis with Tilamain. I was sitting in James Snack with him, eating *boulets*. The only thing to eat when you're hungover. In fact, I was still drunk. That's what my lawyer said, though how that was supposed to help me, I don't know. Tilamain was complaining about women troubles as usual, and as usual, I was ignoring him. I was looking around the room when I saw someone I thought I recognised from somewhere. I realised I must know him: the man looked away quickly in a way that suggested he had recognised *me*, but did not want me to recognise him. I'll tell you who it was. Do you remember that time we were fishing on Grand Rivière and this new *garde* follows us down and gave us shit? He searched Jean-Marie then didn't have the balls to search the rest of us? Well it was him. That *garde*. I was sure of it. I asked Tilamain. Yes, he said. It was him. Then he goes back to his boring story, can you believe it. I'm just wondering what I'm going to do about this guy when someone comes in and joins him. You would not believe who it was. It was him. The fucking *blanc*. The weed dealer. The wannabe White Short. That did it.

Hey you.

Everyone looks up from their bowls, including the *garde* and his mate.

Yeah you. You're the *garde* that was hassling us that time at Pointe aux Sables, aren't you?

And all of a sudden, people stopped eating, their ears burning. Some of these guys were going to the pro-*ganja* rally themselves. That cunt wasn't even in uniform but now everything about him screamed *garde!* – his neatly trimmed hair, his well-scrubbed face, his ironed polo-shirt, the way he got up from his stool in such a panic he knocked it over then ran out – followed by his mate. He might as well have thrown a match into a can of petrol. I ran out straight after them. I chased them both down the street but lost the *garde*. I caught up with the *blanc* though. I dragged him round the back of a garage. No one stopped me. What happened next – I don't know how it happened. I must have still been drunk. I gave that *blanc* the kicking of his life. I had never attacked anyone before, not even Maja who begged for a slap many, many times before he ended up doing what did. But I sure laid into this fuck. I was dancing about on him like fucking Fred Astaire. I was almost thrown off balance with each kick, I put so much of my weight into it. He must have been screaming, making some

kind of noise but I heard nothing. When I had finished I was panting with exhaustion, covered in sweat, like after you've just had a woman. Like I had just come, rolled off him, and was about to fall asleep, I was that calm. It looked like all the life had been kicked out of this *blanc* because I had put all of myself into the kicking of him. My trainers were smeared with blood. I felt my arms being grabbed. Two *gardes*. And their friend from James Snack. I missed the rally and I missed the riots because I was in prison. The *blanc* paid me back threefold for what I did to him. He had *garde* friends, remember. Do you not see that my face is not the shape it was? I still don't know if it was the *garde* I wanted to kick in. But I missed my chance to get him. For Jean-Marie. Those fuckers think it's their island. Whose sweat made their money? Who cultivated the island? This island belongs to no one. And especially not to you. Everything went wrong when you came here, Paul. I don't know why you've come back. What is there here for you? I think you should go.

(vi) 1988 – Part Two

It was Paul's 17th birthday. They had all driven up to Ste Croix to see Père Lavelle's shrine. The remains of Père Lavelle, a celebrated missionary, were supposedly buried underneath the plaster effigy of him which now lay in state, seeming almost to float on a sea of candles in the dim little chapel. If you touched him, or the plaster effigy of him, he would bring you luck or help cure sickness. So Père Lavelle was looking a little chipped and the paint was peeling off him. The way he'd been painted, Paul thought, made him look as though he were wearing make-up and as they left the shrine, Paul had sniggered and said this to Jean-Marie, he frowned. Paul could never understand this about Jean-Marie: how he could be so intelligent, so thoughtful, so damn *cool* and yet have this respect for things, traditions, faith and so on – why didn't he question everything, or at least laugh at things, the way Paul did? There was an innocence about Jean-Marie, a kind of naiveté that he saw in the others too. It made Paul wary of him, made Paul look down on him at times, and left him a little sad, as though Paul and the person he liked best in the world would never quite get each other.

Paul travelled in Claude's truck with the others, while Jean-Marie followed on his bike with Maja on the back; there were too many of them to all fit in the truck – too many people had things to ask of Père Lavelle. On the way home they were going to stop by Calesh's place. He was a *marchand* friend of Maja's whose weed was good but, as Maja told them, laughing, something of a bastard: he bullied his sister, beat his woman, ignored his baby – refusing even to give her his name – though he did love his dog, Bad Boy. Paul was quiet as they drove through Ste Croix: the place looked poorer than Pointe aux Sables where Jean-Marie lived. It was full of zinc shacks but they looked different to the ones in the country; these were left unpainted and were not well-maintained. These did not stand in carefully tended gardens, but scrubby yards. Paul saw chickens pecking in one abandoned lot so full of rubbish, it looked like a garden full of overgrown flowers. They stopped off at the shop to buy a bottle of whiskey. A group of lads Paul's age sitting outside looked at Claude's *transporte* suspiciously as it pulled up. Their heads were all shaved in elaborate patterns that looked almost like barcodes to Paul. He wondered if the patterns meant anything.

By the time they got to Calesh's – another zinc shack, and like the others here, shabby and uncared for – it was raining hard. The yard had turned into pools of yellow mud. As they jumped out and raced to get inside, Paul saw that against the back fence was a stack of hutches full of rabbits. He doubted they were kept as pets. In London homeless people kept dogs for company, protection, a sense of dignity – you were not the lowest of the low as long as another life depended on you. He wondered if the rabbits in their hutches made these people feel better about the shacks they lived in.

They all crowded into Calesh's place, sat down in the front room and cracked open the bottle of Long John Whiskey they'd bought as a mark of respect. The whiskey tasted of the barrel it had been stored in and was so rough Paul thought he felt splinters in his tongue. He did not feel comfortable here, in the presence of Calesh's dog, Bad Boy, an ugly, muscular creature, and Calesh himself who had the same stupid look about him and in his string vest was equally ugly and muscular. Paul made sure to stay out of the conversation which was led by Jean-Marie, and seemed to follow an almost formal, ritualistic pattern of compliments and enquiries. Everyone was quieter than usual, and Paul drifted off to the rhythm of the rain on the corrugated iron roof until Maja whispered in Paul's ear,

Do you like her?

Who?

Maja nodded at a divan in the corner. Paul had barely registered the girl who lay curled up on it, watching television with the sound turned down. Maja had told them that Calesh's sister was a little simple.

He nudged Paul.

So you weren't staring at her?

No, Paul said, looking anxiously at Calesh, to see if he'd heard.

What, you *don't* like her? Maja whispered, with a sneer.

Paul tried to keep calm. In strip lighting, expressions were harder to read. The place looked alien. Calesh, like Bad Boy, was looking up now, having felt some tension in the air.

Well, of course she's pretty, but...

But what? You don't like girls?

Paul shook his head in exasperation, meaning No, it was not like that at all.

No? He doesn't like girls! Maja announced to the room, with a laugh.

But I *do*. Paul said.

But what?

And then Maja started to laugh.

The woman was about his mother's age. She had yellow-brown skin and a crooked smile. She patted Paul on the arse. The others stood outside hooting as she closed the door on them, saying,

Wait your turn, I won't be long with this one.

It was another *tole* house. The roof was leaking.

It's been like that since the cyclone, she shrugged. Come and sit down, she said, patting the bed. It was the only place to sit in the room. Apart from the bed there was a small table covered in a faded formica, the pattern of roses, a wardrobe, the door of which was closed on a piece of garment, and a low shelf which seemed to serve the dual purpose of shrine to Our Lady and dressing table; it held a small statuette and some incense, and bottles of perfume, talc and make-up. When Paul sat down, he smelt damp on the sheets.

The woman took his face in her hands and kissed him deeply. It tingled: he guessed she had been eating chillies. It was a soft kiss. Everything about her was soft, Paul realised, as she took his hands and placed them on her hips. But not soft in a nice way.

She laid him down on the bed and peeled off his shorts. To his shame he had an erection which she started to knead firmly. It felt good. She saw him squirm and said, Not yet.

She took a condom from beside the make-up on her shrine and slid it over his cock, and then, pulling up her dress over her head in one movement, manoeuvred herself onto him, rocking back and forth. He didn't want to touch her, but she took his hands and placed them on her breasts, which were large and slack. Her aureoles were huge, dark. They frightened him. They looked like the fake eyes on butterfly wings, meant to warn off predators. And all the while she was grinding, gradually faster and faster until Paul felt something tear inside of him and he came.

As she was getting dressed he lay there, dumb. He felt as though he wanted to cry, and he felt thirsty and something like hunger all at the same time.

When he stumbled out, he turned to her and thanked her (she laughed), thinking Why? Why thank her? as though she had done him a favour. Perhaps that

was insulting, he thought: she had been paid, after all, the others having taken care of that. A birthday present, they'd said. But she had not been paid much. Paul thought of what 150 rupees would buy in the UK.

When he went out into the road, Maja was still sneering,
You were quick. She should have charged half-price.

Paul ran at him, windmilling his arms, and before anyone knew what had happened, he had smashed Maja on the nose, Maja's hands flying to his face as though he were trying to catch all the drops of blood which now shook from him.

Then everyone began to shout at once: Maja, swearing at Paul, rushing for him, put his hand to the pocket of his jeans and in one motion dug out a flick knife and pulled it open. Some of the others were trying to drag him back, asking him what the fuck he was doing, trying to wrest the knife from him and then Jean-Marie was leaning into him saying,

Cool it, Maja! Cool it!

By this time Paul had started to cry, and he was too angry to care, running at Maja, oblivious to the knife, screaming at him. He no longer remembered what it was he'd said or how it had happened but before he knew it, Jean-Marie had jumped between them, and for a second the three of them had rocked back and forth, locked together in something like a hug, until Jean-Marie gave a cry and fell back onto Paul, a dark jet of blood forced from his neck. Tilamain tore off his t-shirt and tried to staunch the flow but when Jean-Marie slumped back and gurgled, eyes wet and blinking slowly, unfocused, like a newborn taking his first look at the world, Tilamain shrank back, horrified. Paul, holding him, felt him slump back, as though in a faint.

It was only then, absurdly, that Paul wondered what it was that Jean-Marie had asked of Père Laval.

(viii) Burger World

On the bus to Port Louis, Paul realised that Mauritius was smaller than it had first appeared when he arrived. Everywhere he looked, those same fields of cane, those same small cement-block houses, the pyramids of black rock cleared from the fields where the cane grew, those same slabs of rock – steeped hardbacks, spine-up to the sky –and everywhere the earth was pink and dusty like the piment-du-sel Mauritians dipped their fruit into. The landscape seemed to be repeating itself. But Paul was on his way to a much smaller island: Rodrigues. The fact that it still lay in ruins after the cyclone did not discourage him: he knew he'd be left alone there, could hide there among the broken trees and the people trying to rebuild their lives.

The night before, Paul had taken Gaetan out for a Chinese meal in Le Morne to say goodbye. Gaetan, still guilty from his outburst, tried at first to dissuade him. He sat twisting a napkin which bore stains that could no longer be washed out. But Paul had decided.

Those things you said. You were right. I should go. But before I leave, there is someone I want to see.

Before you go, said Gaetan, not looking him in the eye, I want to know. Why did you come? What happened in London?

Paul had always thought of Gaetan as a simple man, and sometimes, even, a stupid one. Paul thought this because there were times when he said things that Gaetan appeared not to fully understand. Paul was at a loss to offer any kind of explanation, or at least, any kind of explanation he thought that Gaetan might understand. He realised that although he could be quick-witted in Creole, bantering and bartering in it, he lacked sufficient fluency for the language he needed now. Or perhaps it wasn't the language he was lacking. All he could think of was *mo honté*. And after he'd told Gaetan the whole story, the story of the accident, of what had happened with Genie, that was exactly what Paul said to him.

I'm ashamed.

And Gaetan said nothing, and couldn't even meet his eye. He understood shame, at least.

When Paul got off the bus at Immigration, it seemed nothing had changed. The buses looked as clapped out, the terminus as pot-holed, the pavement as cracked as he

remembered. He recognised the ornate dilapidation of old colonial buildings, and the shabby little old-fashioned shops with signs in faded, fancy lettering advertising, *Articles du luxe*. Luxury items. In fact they sold exercise books, brooms, skipping ropes, buckets, washing lines, footballs, shoe polish, beauty creams, hair dye. His half-sense of familiarity with the landscape was in the faces too. The mixture of races which was so new, so fresh still, that you could, if you wished to, disentangle them – the Creole from the Chinese, the European from the Indian. Sometimes you could stare for a long time without really being able to tell until the last minute, until a face turned, an expression formed, and from the corner of your eye, some Indian or African or Portuguese or French or Dutch turned and slithered away as suddenly as it had been glimpsed.

The same produce was being sold in the bazaar with the same patter, the pyramids of chillis, green as vipers, the stalls selling milky blue glasses of aloude. But here in Port Louis now, people spoke French to you, rather than Creole. Creole was now a language of intimacy. And set back from the road, behind professional fencing, he noticed more new buildings in the commercial district, shiny plate-glass towerblocks with mirrored surfaces—almost as tall, but not quite, as the royal palms which lined the central avenue stretching down to the new waterfront development, Le Caudan.

He wandered around Le Caudan, with its shops that sold real articles du luxe - duty-free jewellery, exquisite pieces sculpted from local wood. It was odd to think of Maja here. But this was where he worked now. Gaetan had not understood why Paul felt the need to see him, after everything that had happened. Paul had tried to explain. He wanted to know if that night with Jean-Marie had changed Maja's life irrevocably, changed Maja, the way it had changed him.

As for the others – Claude, London, Tilamain – when he thought of them as they were when he'd last seen them, he could imagine them running riot in the air-conditioned corridors of this place. Laughing at all the expensive tourist trinkets, eyeing up the designer watches and hi-tech gadgets with a kind of juicy, vital envy, but if he thought of them as they probably were now, he did not like to think of them here. They would look out of place, shabby, slightly apologetic. A bunch of guys in their late thirties, early forties, married, mostly, with their wives and their sweaty vests, their pirate DVDs of dubbed American action movies, their football pools, their fly-swats and their Saturday bets during the turf season. He was scared to see them.

He was scared of their disappointment, their resentment: that someone with his opportunities should have squandered them so royally. And he was scared that they would be as fucked-up as he was. There were relatively few ways to get fucked-up in a country this small, but it was possible: he did not want to see if they had turned to drink or to horses, to drugs or to loansharks, if their wives, their families had turned their backs on them. He did not want to know if they were unemployable now because the kinds of jobs that were plentiful these days were what they would have seen as women's work— jobs in hotels, in textiles. Or work that was for skilled people. Educated people. How could he face them? Him with his privileged life, as they always saw it, with his chance to see the world, his freedom to love whomever he wanted to love? Mauritius had corrupted him: he had come to this tiny island and he had felt like a giant, or a man at least, though he saw too clearly now that he had only been a boy.

He stopped at Burger World. He joined the queue to be served. When the Chinese kid behind the counter asked what he wanted, he asked to see Maja. The kid called out to the kitchen. Maja – an older, slower, more dishevelled Maja in a Burger World baseball cap and apron – appeared in the doorway. Saw Paul. Almost gasped.

If you've got fifteen minutes. Paul said. I'm leaving for Rodrigues tonight. I'm on my way to the port. But I wanted to see you.

Maja took off the apron, lifted the counter and came through. They went and sat at one of the tables which was shaped like a toadstool.

I often thought about writing to you, Maja said. To explain why things happened the way they did. Why I was the way I was. But now you are here, I can tell you.

(ix) Maja's story

I saw a film once. I forget the name. In it, a soldier, an American soldier, goes AWOL during the Second World War. He is hiding on an island in the South Pacific. On this island, children play freely. They swim and they fish and they laugh. The people are beautiful. Happy. Everyone has enough to eat. Everyone shares. They sing. It's the most beautiful singing. The soldier thinks he's found Paradise. That was what it was like on my island. That was the life I knew until I was six years old. I lived in a small wooden house near the sea with my father, and mother and my twin sisters, Marie-Laure and Giselle. You didn't know I had sisters, did you? And my dog, Fusette. We called her Fusette because she was shaped like a little rocket. Me and Fusette went everywhere together. She used to swim in the sea and catch fish for me! You wouldn't believe what that dog could do. Then one day, when I was six, everything changed. One of the twins, Marie-Laure, got sick. My father took her to Mauritius to get her seen by the doctors there. But like everyone who had travelled over on that ship, they never came home. They were told they no longer had the right to return to the island. To live on it. None of us did. It was a time of great anxiety and confusion. We were all told that we would have to leave. No one wanted to go. But then the ship that used to bring our supplies – all the things we couldn't make or grow for ourselves on the island – stopped coming. It was as though the outside world had forgotten about us. People started arguing over things they would not have argued about before. There was a breadfruit tree in our neighbour's garden. We used to help ourselves to the fruit which grew on the branches overhanging our garden. But now the neighbour started complaining about this. She was an old woman who lived alone. We often helped her out with things. Fetching wood, sharing our catch, and so on. She said the tree belonged to her and we weren't to eat the fruit on it. But she could not have eaten all that fruit herself, never mind collected it! My mother got angry and said if that was how she was going to be then we would not want her fruit, which would taste bitter to her anyhow. So we were forbidden to touch the fruit, which went uncollected and fell off the tree and rotted into the ground. And all this time my father and Marie-Laure were still in Mauritius. We had no news of them. We were worried for Marie-Laure's health, besides. It was around this time that we started seeing strangers on the island. White men in uniforms, with charts and instruments. They would smile at us kids but we were afraid of them. And shortly after the men arrived, the dogs began to

disappear. One day, I was out on the beach with Giselle and Fusette. Suddenly Fusette darted up the shore to something which looked like a washed-up log. She started circling this log, crouching low and howling. We ran to look. It was Hector, my uncle's dog, a very handsome Alsation. When I tried to take Fusette away from this awful scene she bit me. She had never bitten me before. After that, the bodies of more and more dogs began to turn up, bloated and fly-blown. They had been poisoned. We were told by these officials – the white men in uniform – that arrangements were being made for us to leave the island. We were angry about this. But then came one terrible night. I will never forget it. My mother had refused to let me play out that day. I snuck out into the yard anyway to take Fusette her rice – our dogs ate what we ate – but she was not there. Before all this, we let her run free, like all the other dogs of the island. But during this time, we kept her tied up with rope so that she would not disappear like the others. But now she was gone. I wanted to go looking for her but my mother would not let me. I cried and screamed. My mother slapped me. She had never hit me before. She said it was not like how it was before. Things were changing. It was too dangerous to be out on my own. Strange things were happening. I was sent to my bed where I just cried and cried, imagining what might have happened to Fusette. I must have sobbed myself to sleep because I woke in the middle of the night. I had had a nightmare. And as I gradually became more awake I realised that the terrible sounds I had heard in my sleep were coming from outside, from reality, and not from my bad dream. It was a howling, a terrible howling, of many, many dogs. And one of them, I know now, would have been Fusette.

It was the British Government who ordered the rounding up and the gassing of our dogs. It was the US Navy who did it. No, not the Navy. *Members* of the Navy. Young men, younger than we are today. Men like the soldier in that film. Men who probably liked dogs themselves. Men who may even have grown up with dogs, who might have had dogs back at home. It was these men who slaughtered our dogs and how they did it I do not know. After that, no one resisted the orders to leave. We were allowed one suitcase per family. We didn't have much but most of us had more than could fit in a suitcase. My father had made me a kite. Such a pretty thing. I had to leave it behind. He will make you another one, my mother promised. A better one. For if there was one consolation in all this, it was that we would be reunited with Papa and Marie-Laure after almost a year apart. I don't know if I can impress upon you – I certainly couldn't fully conceive it at my young age – the enormous pain of standing

on the deck of a ship, watching your island recede from view, not knowing when you will see it again. Of course, never, for some of us who died shortly after getting to Mauritius. And never, we were told by the British Government. But we could not think 'never' as we watched it disappear from view until all we could see around us was the sea, which is like saying the middle of nowhere. It was a horrible journey. We slept on bags of birdshit in the hold, listening to the horses on deck. They sounded terrified. They made a terrible sound. But we were strangely silent. We were offloaded in Mauritius, and taken to our new home. I almost laugh to think about it now but if I could imagine a place that was the exact opposite to our island, it was the place they took us to. An abandoned estate. More like a barracks. No glass in the windows, no water. Filth in all the rooms. Rats, cockroaches. A prison. As if we were being punished for something. And the man who came to meet us there, my father, was no longer my father. Not the man I recognised. He had grown thin. He was so painfully thin that it seemed to me as he walked towards us that he *was* in pain, as though his bones which stuck out of him like knife blades cut him up as he walked. He smelt strange to me. Marie-Laure had died. They had given her medicine for the pain and after she died my father took what was left for *his* pain. And this thing which was all he was living for now was killing him. Giselle died soon after we arrived. She had what we came to call *Sagren*. It's a word that means sadness, regret. It is like cancer and eats you up inside. It turns you into a shadow. We never saw my father much, after that. Me and Mam moved from the prison to a place in Port Louis. The night Jean-Marie died, when we went to visit the *marchand*, do you remember? Do you remember the miserable state of his place? We lived in a place worse than that. But my mother didn't seem to care. She didn't seem to care about anything by then, not even me. Do you remember the woman from that night? The whore we paid to have sex with you? That is what my mother did. What she became. A shadow, I tell you. I am one of the lucky ones. In prison, I found Allah. Or he found me. And now I know a kind of peace. I do not touch alcohol, I do not touch cigarettes, I do not touch *ganja*, I do not touch women. But you. I can see *sagren* in you. You are not the boy you were. I know why you've come looking for me, after all that happened. After what I did to you. I took your brother. Allah has sent you to me. So I can look you in the eye and ask your forgiveness, and tell you to open your heart to Allah, and become my brother. That is the only way I can make amends for what I did to you.

(x) 1994

The day that Paul realised he had finally lost Gaetan's letter was the last day he saw Sol.

It was possible to spend a long time looking for something you'd lost—keys or sunglasses, say—only to find them hours later in the place you were first looking. This happened because you were not really *seeing* what you were looking at: you were not expecting to find the thing you were looking for in the place where you were looking for it (it was lost, after all): this thing you were looking for was not, as psychologists would say, *in your schema*.

Genie, sprawled out on the bed, told Paul all this as he tore apart his room looking for the letter from Gaetan. Genie had been reading aloud from the outdated psychology textbook she had bought from a charity shop some years ago, the one she would often use to analyse Paul. Over the years, as she grew into a teenager, her analyses were less analytical and more judgemental. But now, at eighteen, she was a responsible, thoughtful kind of kid, and if she had got that way because her loose, wayward brother served as some kind of anti-example, well, then he was good for one thing, it seemed.

You're not helping, Genie.

Why are you looking for it anyway?

I just haven't seen it for a while.

So why do you want to see it now?

I'm scared I've lost it.

You lost it a long time ago, bruv, haha. So have I got this right? The only reason you want to find this letter is to make sure you haven't lost it?

Haven't you got an interview you should be preparing for?

OK, OK.

Paul gave up looking after that, realising that the best time to have a thorough look would be when they were packing up to leave, which would be soon. They had only moved here out of desperation. The squat was an ugly, brown pebble-dashed semi with a glazed-in porch in Plumstead, South East London. Plumstead, with its low buildings and huge motorway skies and its BNP bookshop. Plumstead was only ever intended as a temporary home while they looked to open something more suitable. In the end, thanks to Eloise's big mouth they were obliged to leave the place

long before they had found themselves a new home. And it was while they were packing up to leave that Paul was forced to admit he'd finally lost the letter, and with it, the illusion of ever replying.

The letter had arrived in 1988, a week after Paul's return to London, mostly likely sent the day after he had left Mauritius. He'd always suspected Gaetan of sentimentality (he spoke so little, Paul could only guess at his thoughts) but on paper, and in French, Gaetan seemed even more sentimental than he'd expected. Paul wondered if his poor French meant that he'd missed something, or worse still, read too much into what Gaetan had written. The handwriting was like a child's approximation of elegant, grown-up handwriting, an overflow of emotion suggested by the leakiness of the cheap blue biro.

My dearest brother Paul...

It is with a heavy heart I am writing this. For I don't know when I will see you again. I was so happy to meet you! Even though, the time you were here was so –

What was that word? Unjoyous?

And I am full of shame that it was one of my friends who caused you pain, who took your brother from you. So now I propose that he is not my friend any longer. You know that he is in prison now. Since he took your brother, I will be your brother now. This is why I call you, "My dearest brother Paul". I would love to come in England one day. To see you again, and to know Genie, your sister, who is my sister now. And maybe, to go to Manchester, to see Manchester United play.

Paul was surprised to received a letter from Gaetan at all – Gaetan who barely even spoke – never mind a letter in which he expressed himself so earnestly, an earnestness evident in the pressure of his pen on the thin, lined paper.

He put off the task of replying (how he could he match that level of feeling? In French?), thinking he would wait until he could announce the news of his return to Mauritius. That would be soon. It had to be. He'd come running back to London after Jean-Marie's death, but soon realised there was little for him here. He felt caught in the middle of Mam and Genie's constant rowing. He felt trapped by expectations he was failing to meet, paralysed by the constant questions from Grandmère and Mam of what he was supposed to be doing with his life. While in Mauritius, he thought, he could just get on and *live* it.

To fund his return, Paul organised a place for himself on a paid medical trial. But he hadn't planned on being given a bed next to the man who would become his best friend. Their friendship was cemented the weekend after they left the clinic, at a rave. Paul's first rave and his first Ecstasy.

To say goodbye, said Sol.

But as *You Got The Love* came on, the drug kicked in and Paul raised his eyes to the lights which pulsed like speeded up time-lapse footage of hot-house flowers opening and closing, and what he thought was, *Hello*.

He thought the same thing days later when, on his first visit to Genie at her new school, he met Eloise. Paul and Sol and Eloise had spent the next six years squatting together. And every time they moved on, he would come across Gaetan's letter, which he'd immediately put out of sight again, through shame, only for it to turn up every now and then, despite his best efforts to ignore it.

That spring in Plumstead they had lived as a parody of a suburban family: Paul and Eloise the Mummy and Daddy, Sol the big brother, Genie, on her frequent visits, the baby. Every morning, in keeping with the suburban parody, Paul would leave home as punctually as any commuter, heading into various areas across London where he would spend the day looking for their next home. But that particular morning, as had been the case more and more in recent weeks, Paul had overslept. He was supposed to be meeting a friend who worked for Hackney Council and had procured for him a list of their empty properties. Eloise, who might otherwise have woken him up, had spent the night at her mother's. He raced downstairs and left the house, running for a bus that was waiting at the stop. It wasn't until the bus had pulled away that Paul realised he had not wished Genie luck for her interview.

The vague feeling of guilt and of things not being quite right did not leave him all day, and were only to intensify when he and Eloise came back to the house in the early evening. When Paul unlocked the porch door and swung it open, he found Genie, curled up in the corner, wearing her interview suit. It seemed he had locked it that morning, forgetting that Genie did not have keys. Genie, leaving the house, had slammed the front door behind her, and, on going to open the porch door, found she couldn't. It was locked. And now so was the door to the house. Since everyone had been out all day she had spent several hours in a kind of limbo – neither inside the

house nor out of it. Paul was privately unnerved. He felt as though, in some fundamental way, he had denied his sister's very existence.

When Sol returned home that evening he asked how the interview had gone. With some bitterness, Genie explained what had happened. Sol turned on Paul.

You stupid, selfish fuck.

It was a mistake.

Yes, said Sol, Your little sister made a mistake thinking she could rely on her stupid, selfish fuck of a brother.

I made a fucking mistake.

Have a look in that psychology textbook of hers under 'mistake'.

What are you on my case for? It's OK, she'll ring them up tomorrow, she'll explain, and they'll rearrange the interview. For chrissakes *I'll* ring up and explain.

Sol slammed a fist down on the table.

You don't get off that easily. You're getting looser and looser but it's your life to fuck up. Just leave Genie out of it.

Eloise, in the kitchen listening, hotly intervened.

Don't you play the surrogate big brother! Don't you dare! Did you tell Paul about Genie's fifteenth?

Paul went white.

Well? said Eloise, Didn't you fuck Genie on her fifteenth birthday?

There was an instant of horrified silence. Then Paul leapt up from where he sat at the dining room table. In one move he grabbed Sol by the neckline of his t-shirt and with his other hand, punched him. Sol staggered backwards and hit the wall, dislodging a framed poster of the young Mick Jagger as he reeled away. Without a word, Paul left the house.

He headed for the nearest pub. It was one he usually avoided. One of those estate pubs with a flat roof, strip lighting and a scuffed-up pool table, hunkered over by scuffed-up blokes. There were a couple of them in tonight. Paul saw from the corner of his eye that they had clocked him. He took a few gulps of his pint and hoped they'd not clocked him clocking them. He was still shaky after his fight with Sol. He found a table in the corner and tried to ignore them, and the fact that they were wearing pastel-coloured polo shirts. That smelt like trouble. He didn't need more. Halfway through his second pint, Eloise came in looking for him.

Drink up. I don't like it in here.

I'm not in here because it's nice, said Paul. Is that true, what you said?

I think you know it is. Or you wouldn't be in here.

Did she tell you?

I guessed. She told me she pretty much engineered the whole thing. Don't know if that makes you feel any better or worse, but I don't care. Don't know what you're so bothered about your sister's sex life for. I was the same age when we got together.

Paul said nothing.

I don't like the way those men are looking at you.

At first he thought Eloise was only trying to change the subject, or diminish his emotional turmoil with a more immediate, local concern. But stealing another glance at the pool table only confirmed his original fears. He had to admit he didn't like the look of them either.

And perhaps the two men had not had any malevolent intentions towards him until Eloise stared at them so openly and with such hostility. But whether this was the case or not, once Eloise had convinced Paul to come home with her – Sol had gone out, Genie had gone to bed – the two men got up and followed them out of the pub. The men continued to follow at a respectful distance until Paul and Eloise had left the carpark, after which they shouted out *Paki!*

Paul took it silently and it would have been left at that, he said glaring furiously at Eloise the next morning while Genie fussed about his face with a packet of frozen peas, if it hadn't been for Eloise and her big fucking mouth, stopping to swear back at them – some ridiculous shit about him *not* being a Paki because he was actually from Mauritius. After that, they'd felt obliged to beat Paul up. Baby Blue had grabbed Eloise while Lilac went at it almost regretfully. It followed that from now on they would have no choice but to do the same should they ever encounter him again. And if not them, friends of theirs. This area was the home of the BNP's headquarters, after all.

So Paul and Eloise moved in with friends in Brixton while he continued to find them another home. Their next move was to Old Street and a whole floor of an old grain warehouse. But Sol did not come with them. He did not speak to Paul again.

(xi) Rodrigues

It took Paul a day and a night to get to Rodrigues by ship. And less than a week to find his last ever squat.

He took a seat on deck where he found a copy of the previous day's newspaper. On the front page he read, with unaccountable sadness, that the Muslim girl who had poisoned herself had died after a long and painful struggle. Two shady-looking men nearby who were passing a bottle of rum between them noticed the headline and chipped in. There were a lot of suicides in Mauritius, they said.

Paul had realised this on his last visit. Nearly every week there was a story of a poisoning, a hanging, a leap into the void or sometimes a drowning, possibly not accidental. The reasons given never seemed reason enough: debt, divorce, unemployment, bereavement. In order to consider taking that step it was enough just to be ambivalent about life. Without money, without an education, without talent, without somehow managing to stow away, on someone else's passport, say, if you were poor and likely to stay that way, suicide really was the only way of getting off this island, if you weren't prepared to wait around for death.

The two men – Mauritians – described themselves as business men. They had been detained in Mauritius because of the cyclone, but were now happy to be going home.

Where in Rodrigues are you headed? they asked.

Don't know yet, said Paul, not inviting further questions.

They brought out a pack of cards and invited him to play. He shared their rum and lost most of his spare change to them in the game. Eventually, the bottle was emptied and the two men fell asleep. Paul, trying his best to ignore the groaning of metal, the clanking of serious machinery, the bloody tang of rust, took out the book he had taken from Mam's. It was falling apart. The damp at Gaetan's had swollen and buckled its pages and there were translucent spots where drops of his sweat had fallen. Paul liked the idea of the book breathing in the air around it. But he was not enjoying it. He had trouble with the antique French, and its pious tone, which offended him. Eventually he gave up reading it and looked at the engravings instead. Some of them were missing.

They docked at Port Mathurin late the next morning. Paul did not walk around Port Mathurin but instead headed straight to the terminus, where he took the first bus

that came. His intention was to ride to the end of the line. The bus was heading towards the West of the island, which Paul had heard was wilder and less inhabited. That suited him.

Rodrigues was like rural Greece but with a slightly fantastic feel, he thought. Like Greece but Greece in the time of Legends, when the world was new – it was in the mineral glitter of the light, the grass so lush it looked wet and everywhere, cabri – small mountain goats – feeding on terraces fenced in by black rock. But where the cyclone had passed the earth had turned to mud and flowers broken off from bushes were strewn about like litter. Men were working hard to rebuild the place; Paul saw the sweat glittering on their skin, their muscles rippling like wind on water and all of them shouting out to one another, the inevitable chaos that came whenever people in panic tried to restore order. If you kept rebuilding parts of the island laid to waste after each cyclone, eventually the original Rodrigues would disappear altogether. His thoughts wheeled along steadily at the same pace as the bus but then it swerved suddenly and the brakes screeched and Paul was jolted – a dog had run out into the road. It looked back at him, affronted, and continued to jog along, its colouring that of an overripe banana, its tail the shape of one too. The fruit on the trees and the dogs in the street; that's what he'd loved best about Mauritius, he thought. Rodrigues was like Mauritius used to be, the men on the boat told him sadly. Before Mauritius got corrupted.

He got off the bus and walked to the nearest house, a square cement block painted pink. A middle-aged woman in a house-coat answered the door, which opened directly onto the front room. Behind her, two young boys in Liverpool strips lay on the sofa, watching cartoons in the way children did, deep in concentration, unsmiling.

Do you know of any rooms to rent around here? Just for a few nights?

Are you a tourist?

I suppose so. Paul replied. I'm just travelling around.

The woman shrugged.

You could stay here.

He did not feel comfortable in his room: the window was so high that the room seemed almost windowless, like a cell, and it was lit by fluorescent strip-lighting which buzzed like a bluebottle even after it had been switched off. Whenever he turned the light on, the little lizards which constantly scaled the walls froze – as

though immobility somehow rendered them invisible – then scattered in a second. Everywhere you stepped there were insects but you only caught a glimpse from the corner of your eye before they slithered or scuttled away. Their constant presence put Paul on edge – he did not like the unexpectedness of insects – but the lizards he liked. Their eyes shone with a beady, benign intelligence. And they ate mosquitoes.

The woman was a prostitute, Paul soon realised. Her customers dropped in at all times of the day and disappeared into a back room with her. They would stop off on their way out to pat the boys on the head or fix something which the woman pointed out – a leaky tap, a wobbling chair. Though at no point did she proposition Paul. He was half-offended, half-relieved. She later told him that the two boys, who never seemed to wear anything but their Liverpool strips, were her grandsons. Their mother was in Mauritius, working in a hotel.

On his first morning there, Paul went down to the beach and walked along the shoreline, passing grass silvered with salt, near a shallow river that didn't quite meet the sea. Perhaps it had run out of energy. Although when the rains were up, perhaps it swelled and flowed out into the sea and perhaps there was a point then at which the fresh water and the sea water mingled. Paul had heard that sharks liked to gather where rivers fed into the sea, because fish were plentiful there.

He walked until eventually he reached a promontory, then walked its length, the farthest he could walk without walking into the sea, up above rocks and the waves which crashed against them, sending up spray. There he found a small bamboo shack with a straw portal and a zinc roof. A piece of zinc pulled across the entrance served as a door. Paul peered around it. There was no one inside. He looked back at the beach. He couldn't see anyone around. He pulled aside the zinc and went in. He found only a pile of old blankets. What would it be like to sleep there, he wondered. How lonely would it feel? The surrounding grass was littered with smashed-up bits of shell – the land must have recently been underwater, probably during the cyclone. The shack must have been built after that. He wondered who had built it and if they still lived there. Years ago in Mauritius, on a trip down to Le Morne to see Gaetan, he and the gang had passed an abandoned cabin. Paul wanted to go inside but Jean-Marie would not let him: just setting foot in the place would send you mad, he'd said. There were so many bad spirits inside. When Paul asked for the

story Gaetan couldn't tell him anything. Only that runaway slaves had sheltered there; that something terrible had happened.

Every morning, he walked to the shack. After a week, when he found that the place was still empty, he decided that he would move in. On the way back to collect his things, he wondered if there was a myth about this place too. But he didn't care. He was not superstitious.

(xii) The Story of the Shack

There was once a man who lived in a shack by the sea. This man had been a slave, but had been freed. Feeling himself disgusted with the human race – by the capacity for man to enslave man, of the enslaved man to turn on his equally unfortunate brother – the former slave decided that true freedom lay in a world where he could live alone. So he did not follow his newly freed brothers and sisters who formed communities, nor did he follow those who had ambitions to travel beyond the island of their enslavement, freedom for them being the opportunity to see new worlds. Instead, when the day of his liberation came, he walked for two days in the opposite direction to everyone else, away from all signs of human habitation, to the other side of the island. The wilder side. No one wanted to live here, where the sea was too rough to bathe or swim in. But the insolent power of the sea here pleased the man, since the boom of the waves on the shore sounded like canons, warning off others. The brutality of life on the wild side did not scare him. As a slave, he was inured to brutality. So he camped in a forest by the sea, and there, over many days and nights, the man set about clearing a plot of land where eventually, over the course of many more days and nights, he built a shack just big enough for himself. Having made the shack, he tilled the land around it. He kept no animals: he could not bring himself to fence in any living thing. He spent his days tending to the garden, or fishing in the river. He would take walks in the forest and examine any new plants he found for signs of possible use, or of beauty. His nights were spent by the fire, singing songs he half-remembered, or staring into the flames where strange visions appear to those who dare look long enough. The man lived in peace like this for many months. But one day, when he awoke, the man felt uneasy for the first time since being set free. The shack was filled with a strange sort of light and with it, an unnatural silence. At first, he thought an angel had come to him. He had heard that angels emitted a terrible light, and that their presence stilled the very air, and with it, all sound. But there was no angel in his house. Walking through the forest to investigate further, he noticed that the wind had assumed a higher pitch, like the whine of an injured animal. This was all that could be heard. The man felt that creatures who normally inhabited the forest with their myriad sounds were all watching him silently from their hiding places, waiting to see what he did next. And when he reached the beach, he saw that a malevolent, yellow light had descended on the world like a fever and that the waves

were as tall as trees. On seeing this, the man understood and was filled with a sense of great joy and exhilaration. He had lived through many cyclones during his time on the island, but he had never before witnessed one. The master had always carefully stored his slaves in the basement of the big house whenever a cyclone was predicted, for fear of losing them. So to witness a cyclone, indeed, to have his house – his home, his labour of many months – destroyed by one, and perhaps, even to die in a cyclone – now he was truly free!

(xiii) 2003

When Paul saw the ambulance pull up to the club, his first instinct was to run. So he ran: he ran home and then he ran around the flat, yanking at drawers, grabbing armfuls of clothes and stuffing them blindly into his small suitcase, Mam's, the small cardboard one she'd carried through Heathrow in 1964, out into that first English morning. The broken suitcase he had to tie a belt around to stop everything from falling out.

Hoisting himself up onto the top deck of the bus, Paul walked its length and fell into a seat by the window. He could tell by the smell of stale sweat and exhaustion on their faces that the other passengers, all of whom looked foreign, were going home after working their night-shifts. It was in their expressions as much as the unfamiliar planes of their faces, their foreignness. He wondered how many of them were in London illegally. He too needed to hide. Hotel Europe would be a start. They used to walk past it on their way to Grandmère's every Sunday. As a kid he'd wondered about the kind of tourists who found themselves there, in run-down Hackney, on a major road where lorries thundered past, heading for the docks and warehouses of Essex. The hotel guests were Indians and Somalis and pinch-faced white people. They seemed bewildered. They didn't look much like tourists to him. Then when he was older, he would catch his breath as he walked past, thinking of the blonde girls in suspenders who wandered the rooms inside: he told himself it was a whorehouse. It was the gauzy curtains drawn across open windows; there was something teasing about the lazy way they stirred in the breeze, at once inviting and secretive.

Paul remembered those imaginary whores as he unlocked the door of his room that first night. Trembling, he got into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. He lay there for the whole of that day, waiting for sleep. He needed dark—unplugged dark—for dreamless sleep. But his room was on the ground floor. When night fell it was hard to drift off, what with the fizzy street-light spilling through the curtains, soaking into the carpet; and car beams tracked like searchlights across the ceiling, narrowly missing him in their sweep (he wanted to cower in the corner, arms across his face).

The next three days slid away like sweat off Paul's back leaving nothing but a salt stain on his sheets: three days and three nights he spent there, lying drenched in his

bed, alone. In the half-light of his fever, he took in all at once the bubble-glass window, the room's ablutionary chill, the part-tiled walls, its particular acoustics and then it came to him: he was sleeping in a bathroom! And so he came to think of his bed as a bath, and he thought, as he lay there bathed in sweat, that many people died in their beds but a fair few died too in their baths: Marat, Jim Morrison, Mme Bonnard. The morning his fever broke, he woke with the certainty that if he didn't get out of this ex-bathroom – out of Hackney, out of London – he would die.

During the days that followed, Paul barely ate. He stopped shaving. He spent a long time looking at vegetables. Looking at vegetables made him calm. The vegetables outside the Turkish shop: onions, nestling in their grubby cardboard box; the ripe tomatoes hung tightly together, still clinging to their vines. If you touched the vines then held your fingers to your nose you went dizzy with the smell. What was it? Earth? He stood sniffing his fingers then pinched off a bunch and took them into the shop. Two dark-skinned middle-aged men—not quite Indian, not quite black—stood by the counter, chatting in another language, which Paul, registering the mild shock he always felt in these situations, recognised as Creole. The two men were talking about a recent cyclone. Paul looked at the display of chewing gum on the counter, trying not to look as though he were listening, trying to hide the fact that he understood. Cyclone Kalunde had smashed up Rodrigues, the little sister island of Mauritius, but left Mauritius itself untouched.

After he left the shop, a plan started to form: he would go to Mauritius. But how would he get the money together? He thought about the paracetamol tub in his broken suitcase and an idea formed. He felt calmer now that he knew what he had to do. He looked wild though, he realised, as his reflection swam up at him from the window of a parked car: his shirt hung off him and his eyes were hollowed-out. He looked like a different person.

His search for a phonebox in working order led him towards Dalston. He and Sol had squatted there over ten years previously. But the old storage places and light industrial units – the places they might have squatted – were now expensive-looking flats. He could spot as he walked further up the road which buildings were ripe for transformation. You only had to look past the grime and the broken glass to see the high ceilings, the large windows and, where the buildings were still being used for

something close to their original purpose, the desultory way in which the workers went about their business, as though they knew it was only a matter of time before the building was sold and they were moved out to some new industrial estate on the edge of town. You could spot those places the same way a model scout could see through a teenage slouch or a pound or two of puppy fat to the amazing bones beneath; Sol and Paul would instinctively scope out buildings as potential squats, drawn by a kind of long-term vacant look about the place, always trying to line up the next place in preparation for the inevitable eviction from their current home.

In those days Paul had always believed that he and Sol were equal in terms of ambition and prospects. That is to say, that they both lived very much in the present. They hung around together a lot, they did drugs, they rescued broken things from skips and tried to repair them or if that was not possible, to destroy them in creative ways. But what he realised now was that there had always been something different about Sol – he was never really employed but he was always busy, in a way that Paul himself never had been: Paul had been energetic and nervous and fidgety but ultimately, directionless as though, quite literally, he hadn't known what to do with himself. So when they parted ways and Paul heard how Sol was getting on, Paul began to feel that the lack of any kind of progress in his own life at this age was now a kind of regression.

He stopped at a newsagent's to get some change. A girl hanging around outside asked Paul if he would buy her some cigarettes. She held out a fiver. Paul said No, automatically. He always said No automatically whenever anyone in the street asked him for something. But then an idea came to him. He said he would buy her the fags if she did him a favour. She leered at him and fiddled with the gold chain around her neck.

What kind of favour?

I just want you to phone someone for me.

OK, she shrugged.

Presumably she was under-sixteen, but she was quite a sophisticated-looking under-sixteen year old, Paul thought, with her coppery blusher, her Josephine Baker style kiss-curls and flashy gold hoop earrings. He handed the girl her cigarettes and they walked across to the phonebox together. The glass was smashed, the pavement covered in what looked like crushed ice. The girl walked in, not even pausing to register the broken glass, and Paul, without thinking, squeezed in behind her. He

realised too late he could have heard just as well standing outside. He felt awkward then. Once he had been connected to the hospital, he passed her the receiver and said she was to ask after Genie Lallan: if anyone asked who was calling, she should identify herself as Genie's sister.

Hello, the girl said, standing straighter, I'm calling about Genie Lallan.

He tried to put his ear close to the receiver but the girl shooed him away, staring at the floor in concentration, nodding and uh-huh-ing every now and then. He could smell the fruity stuff she had put on her hair. Finally, she thanked whoever she had been speaking to and hung up.

She's alright. The nurse said that she gave her some flowers.

Who did? The nurse?

Yeah, I just said that.

No, I mean, did the nurse give Genie flowers?

She looked at Paul as though he were stupid.

No! Genie gave the nurse flowers. That's how she remembered who she was. The nurse said that Genie gave her flowers when she left.

Genie's left the hospital?

Yeah, I just said so didn't I? The nurse said Genie is fine.

Paul leaned his head back against the glass weakly, realising too late that there was no glass; he lost his balance and put a hand out to steady himself. The girl burst out laughing.

She your girlfriend then?

No, said Paul.

He held open the door for her and she squeezed past him. He watched as she sauntered down the street. She stopped to light a cigarette and looked back to see if Paul was still there before turning the corner.

He dialled another number. He was not sure until the moment of dialling if he would even remember the number, and in a sense he did not, he realised, as his fingers hovered over the keypad: Paul did not remember Eloise's number, but his fingers did.

Hello?

It's Paul. I need to see you.

Paul wondered if Eloise's hair had grown back yet. When he was with her, it was long and wild. She used to stroke at it absently as though pacifying a cat that was trying to get her attention. He'd often pull or tug it accidentally as he turned over in bed. Or it would get caught in his flies and she'd yelp, eyes narrowing on him. But she would never cut her hair, she told him, because it reflected her personality. So when he had last seen her, a year previously, it had been a shock to find her hair so horribly short. It had taken a few seconds to recognise her when she came into the visitor's room.

Christ! Did the council do that?

Oh, she said, patting the back of her head, as though looking for something that was missing, You mean my hair.

I get it, said Paul lightly, realising with a lurch that she had cut it herself, Self-harming. Is that what you're in for this time?

I like it like this. Makes me look thinner.

Oh, disorderly eating again.

After the hair, there had not been much else to talk about; nothing they could talk of here, in this pale, clean room with the high windows.

Eloise nodded over to a young woman he recognised as being famous. She was sitting with two people who were clearly her parents.

I played chess with her once. She plays like a fucking kamikazi.

Paul failed again to recognise her immediately in the gloom of the basement City wine-bar where they had arranged to meet. Again, the hair. It was no longer the shade of dyed red that made her skin look creamier than French butter. She'd gone natural, an indeterminate brown colour with an almost greenish sheen; the colour of sticks which crack underfoot in an English wood, he thought. It was bobbed, accentuating the little pointed chin that used to dig into his shoulder so viciously when he held her, as he did now, before she pulled away smartly.

Have I seen you in a suit before? he asked.

Not unless you count school uniform.

They exchanged tense pleasantries. Once the drinks arrived, Eloise fished into her handbag and brought out a brown envelope, handing it to him.

This is what you came for. I don't want it back. And I don't want to see you again.

I'm not planning on coming back any time soon. Thank you for this, Eloise.

She asked, as an afterthought, where he was staying.

A hotel. A cheap one.

He had only ever stayed in a hotel once before. He told her the story. A girl he knew at school slept with people for money. She liked him. She would do it for free she said, but she wanted to stay in a hotel. She picked one all the way across town, in Kensington. He'd had to hock his bike to pay for it. He'd never been to Kensington before. Walking around that area, trying to find it, he'd felt as though he were in a foreign country. The room was dim, the walls were a dull shade of red, the colour of dried blood. The air was thick with stale cigarette smoke and dust. This and the slow pounding in his chest had made it hard to breathe. He lay on the bed and waited for the girl. A few hours later he was still lying there alone, smoking the packet of cigarettes he had bought her for afterwards, watching MTV.

I didn't even feel like wanking. I walked all the way from Mayfair to Kensington, looking for that hotel. If you want to feel like a stranger in your own city, go to a part you've never been to before. That's how I felt in Mayfair.

He remembered the flashy car dealerships, the displays of oriental carpets for rich people to wipe their mud on. The Arab men in their shades and flowing robes, the Arab women in their shades and flowing robes, the liveried men loitering at the doors of hotels, all as transitory and featureless as the whorls of dust which blew disconsolately down the long blank streets. All the boutique windows slippery with a numb blank richness that looked right through you, and him, gawping, poor as a cockroach.

You remind me of that girl, you know. The one who never came to meet me. My first thought when I met you was that you looked as though you should have a tail. You looked as though you licked yourself clean. She was feral like that, too.

You've told me all this before, Paul. And I have to get back to work.

I can walk you there if you like.

Some of the buildings they passed were of a cobalt blue glass, like the kind you looked through to view an eclipse. Perhaps you needed to look through coloured glass – emerald glass, grey-green glass the colour of the river – to see this place, Paul thought, his neck craning to take in the Olympian heights of the buildings around him. Eloise said they reminded her of a story Paul had once told, about an ancient Greek philosopher who had committed suicide by jumping into a volcano and how this had been written about much, much later by another philosopher, this French guy who had

admired the Greek for choosing Earth over Heaven: *What an affirmation of love for the Earth!* Then the French guy had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had also killed himself by jumping from a building.

I don't remember that story, said Paul.

They stopped at a bench in front of the river and sat down. Eloise took out a packet of cigarettes, the menthol kind that teenaged girls favoured, a taste she had never outgrown. She offered the packet and Paul took one. Smoking them reminded him of Eloise: the actual taste of them – fresh and cold and hot and stale all at the same time.

There's something different about you, he said.

There is.

New boyfriend?

Among other things.

Paul got a soapy corrosive feeling then, as though his skin were covered in battery acid, a mixture of jealousy, sadness, lust. He had not had sex in such a long while that the thought of it scared him. In between break-ups with Eloise he would have casual sex with people he met in bars. But increasingly he found that the experience diminished him somehow. The effort of having to make himself anew for each encounter, after each encounter, made him feel as though he were losing pliability, as though he were – he'd heard this somewhere – losing a little of the gold leaf from his photograph.

Paul leaned over and kissed Eloise, her mouth warm with wine. She pulled away,

Come on, she said gently, You know it's not going to happen.

She reached out a hand, but her touch was cautious, as though she were touching something which might be very hot.

You've changed.

Good, she said. When I was with you, I felt as though I was on the edge of the world, I felt like I was outside looking in. You made me feel like that. I loved that about you, I sought it out when I was young, but it scares me to be like that now. How can you live like you do? Why do you always want to make things difficult for yourself?

I just need to know that I'm alive.

Why do you have to be dead or alive? she said, Can't you find a happy medium like the rest of us? You wanting to run away from your mum and Genie, for example. What's that about?

Then Paul told her everything.

He told her about the night he'd broken his rule and given Genie a pill when she'd asked him to sort her out: how he'd refused and she'd pouted, said she'd take her business elsewhere, nodded at a bloke Paul didn't like the look of. How he'd said, Don't be stupid, he could give you anything; how Genie had smiled in a way that said, Exactly!

And so he'd slipped a pill from his cigarette packet and passed it to her. As she'd squeezed his hand in return he thought in a flash that it was all fucked up, him giving Genie this fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil when Genie – her smirk lit up by the strobe – was surely the snake here... Paul told Eloise about losing Genie, about finding girls in a back corridor, the girls with long lashes, high heels who looked like an avenue of spiky winter trees, leaning against the walls of the narrow corridor which led to the back room at the back of which was a trestle table heaped high with coke. He told Eloise tales that made her nose water, of how he'd troughed at that trestle table, taking turns with the spiky girls, then jumped the queue until he'd felt sick with himself and everyone around him, how he'd left the place, left Genie there. He told Eloise that it was while he was outside, striding up and down in the watery first light of morning, his body thrumming with power chords played on cathedral organs, that an ambulance pulled up. He told Eloise that it was while he was wondering: Why not a back entrance for such eventualities, for the casualties, as they would for the VIPs? that he'd caught sight of the girl on the stretcher and saw, through the plastic mask clamped to her face, that it was Genie. And before she could ask him, he told Eloise: Yes. I left her there.

Paul and Genie

(i) Paul

He did not sleep well on his first night in the shack, unused to the sound of the sea, and the cold from the wind which crept through the cracks. He mummified himself in the blankets that the previous occupant had left. He sniffed the rough wool pressed to his face. It was strange to know them as a smell in the dark. He only slept once morning came, daylight somehow calming the sea, allowing him to drift off to the shushing of the waves.

When he awoke, he stood looking out over the promontory, towards the horizon. There were times in London when he would get claustrophobic in places where he couldn't see the entrance or exit, but here he felt free. You could see the entrance or exit – that is, the sea – from everywhere here, on what he liked to think of as an island, his island, on the island of Rodrigues.

(ii) Genie

There were many myths about lost treasure buried on this island, the taxi driver told her. Genie looked out onto the ochre and black landscape, the tough grass, the stones of lava strewn about as though spelling out a message from a lost time. It was wild-looking here, the grass overgrown, broken trees which had not been broken cleanly; the splintering made her wince. The island was still in tatters after Cyclone Kalunde and it made sense, she saw now, that Paul had run here to hide, a broken man among the broken trees. She tried to read in the stones, the curve of a slope, the twist of a wind-stunted tree, some sign of Paul.

(iii) Paul

Paul walked down to the freshwater stream and drank from it, splashing water on his face and body. He walked on through the trees, looking for more branches. In between the broken trees, others stood whole: palm trees which had yellowed in the heat. Baobabs trailing desiccated entrails like streamers. *Man your family tree, it's like a baobab.* Maja had said this, looking from him to Jean-Marie. The coconut trees looked faded, tired; they leant towards the ground, heads bent with fatigue. It was the sun. The sun was so hot, even the sea was barely able to lift its head, it seemed.

He walked deep into the trees until he came to a road and stopped. To his left, a hundred yards away, he saw a half-built house, a man with a pick-up truck unloading sacks of cement. In the other direction, by a bus-stop, he saw a snack-shack. Feeling in his pocket for change, he walked towards it.

A boy of about twelve stood behind the counter, reading a comic book. He was nodding in time to a seggae on the radio. Paul recognised it as one he'd heard a lot in Mauritius: *Peros Vert*. It wasn't until Paul had said hello that he realised it was the first word he'd spoken aloud in a long while.

What are you after? the boy asked.

A glass-case on the counter held dhal pancakes, and vegetables deep-fried in batter. Tins of soft drink were displayed in pyramids behind him on a shelf.

I'll take a can of Pepsi, Paul said, and some of those vegetables.

As the boy filled a paper-bag, which immediately broke out in greasy patches, Paul asked,

That little hut on the beach.

Yes?

Who lives there?

Nobody now, said the boy, still nodding his head in time to the music, It was Ti Jean's place.

What happened to him?

His house got smashed up in the cyclone. He went a bit strange after that. Said he didn't want to live there anymore so he built that place on the beach. And then he got worse. Started ranting about God punishing us for our sins. Then he disappeared. Maybe he got washed away, with his sins.

Gaetan had always liked that song, *Peros Vert*. And once, when he'd been drunk, it had even made him cry. He liked the words, he said to Paul helplessly, wiping away the tears, a lament for the island which the singer's family had been forced to leave. That was the name of the island: *Peros Vert*; the island Maja's family had been forced to leave. Gaetan said,

It makes me wonder what Maja would have been like if he had been left to live his whole life there.

If Ti Jean was still alive, he might return at some point. He would want his shack back. Paul was squatting the place after all. But listening to that wind last night and the waves which seemed to be creeping up on him, coming ever closer, Paul guessed it might be the island itself which evicted him.

The boy asked where Paul was from. He was delighted when Paul said London. They talked for a while about Arsenal, then Paul said goodbye. He crossed the road and was about to disappear into the trees, when the boy waved at him. Paul, chewing on a round of fried aubergine, waved back.

On his way to the shack, he collected branches which had been torn from the trees and lay strewn all about. He carried these over to the beach, where he set about building a fire. Crouching by the pile of branches and dried grass on the beach, ready to set it alight, he heard Eloise: *Like rubbing two damp sticks together*. She had said that once, about their failing sex life. But that part of his life was over now. Over the last couple of years it had seemed that a succession of options had now become closed to him. But as he sat staring into the lazy flames, shifting every few seconds to present a different part of his body to the heat he realised it did not disturb him to think of his life in this way. Left with fewer options, it was easier to make decisions. He supposed all his options would gradually fall away until he was left with only one: the only decision really worth considering. Whether to carry on living or not.

(iv) Genie

She headed straight for the port where she stood for a long while, staring down into the milky green water, breathing in the hot smell of sweat on skin, dead fish, rubbish, salt and rust, wet rope and seawater, watching the flow of people and goods on and off the ship. Boxes of hi-tech hardware and sacks full of rice and sugar, and a jeep. Wicker cages full of chickens, strings of dried octopus. Genie stood mesmerised by all this activity until it began to slow down. Then she approached a man who seemed to have some official status in connection with the ship. He wore only a pair of orange surf shorts which looked almost fluorescent against his black skin. She tried to get his attention but he did not seem to hear her, instead turning to signal someone, raising his arms and pointing to confirm his instructions.

Genie tapped him on the arm and felt a slick of sweat. He turned to her, tossing his head coquettishly, a gesture which set his finely plaited hair swinging and one which he carried off quite elegantly, Genie thought, for such a fat man. He made an impatient gesture. Genie realised then that he was deaf.

She asked as clearly as she could, in French, if he worked there. He looked closely at her mouth but did not seem able to follow her words. After her third attempt at explaining, the man grabbed a colleague and signed to him. This man turned to Genie and asked her what the problem was.

Do either of you work here? she asked.

Yes, we both do. On the *Pride*.

Genie showed them Paul's photo and asked if they'd seen him. The interpreter shook his head, but his colleague nodded and began to sign.

He was on the last crossing, a week ago today, said the interpreter, following his friend's gestures. He sat on deck with a couple of guys - other passengers - for almost the whole journey.

Did you talk to him? Do you know where he is? Did you hear what he was saying to those men? Do you know who they are? She turned from one to the other, as the interpreter repeated these questions to his colleague, each followed by a business-like shake of the head.

He says that all he can tell you is that the guys he saw with your brother seemed like Port Mathurin types to him, bandits if you ask him.

Genie thanked them and gave them her details, asking them to call if they saw Paul again. As she turned to go, she stopped in her tracks and called out directly to the man who had seen Paul, forgetting for a moment that he could not understand her: why had he noticed Paul? How was it he remembered seeing him? It was almost two weeks ago after all, since Paul had travelled over. This time the interpreter quoted his friend directly,

He looked foreign. But not like any tourist or even a business man. I wondered what the hell this guy was doing over here. There is nothing for him here.

(v) Paul

He decided he would wash his blankets. As he pulled them up from the mattress, a yellowed newspaper cutting fluttered to the ground. He bent to pick it up.

The story concerned a man from a small village in India.

This man had suffered with stomach pains all his life. He was too poor to see a doctor. But finally, when he reached his thirties, his stomach had distended to the point where the pain was unbearable. He sought treatment. Cancer was suspected but the results of blood tests proved inconclusive. Finally an x-ray was performed. It was discovered that the cause of the man's pain was his unborn twin, who had fused with him in the womb and had been growing inside him all these years. An operation to remove the twin revealed that he was male, with adult-sized hands, feet and genitals. His head was covered in thick hair. He had teeth. The article did not say whether or not the dead twin resembled his brother.

Asked how he felt about the situation, the man said, I am shocked. I have five sisters. I always wanted a brother and he was growing inside me all my life. And now he has been taken out of me, I have no pain. But I feel as though I have killed him.

The ripples of light on the clear water made him think of Eloise's breasts, the stretch-marks which appeared when she'd lost weight, when she'd had to go to hospital. He wrung the blankets out, then hung them on a tree. Then he made his way to the snack shop. He had been there several times now. The boy's name was Jean-Marie. That's my brother's name, Paul had said. Today, when he saw Paul approaching, the boy smiled.

I've got a surprise for you!

Don't tell me Ti Jean's turned up?

This was a running joke of theirs. Jean-Marie laughed and brought out a flask from under the counter.

Soup!

Soup? For me?

Lentil soup. You eat the same thing every day. I thought you might like a change. It's what we had for dinner last night.

That's great. Thank you. I'll give you the flask back tomorrow.

You can give it to my mum.

Your mum?

I'm not going to be here from now on. I'm going back to school tomorrow.

When Paul returned to the shack he looked through his things. He wanted to bring something to give Jean-Marie. But looking through his bag, he found nothing. He had only basics with him. His prison possessions. The pills. An old book that was falling to pieces. He could find nothing to give the boy. He lay down on his bed, angry and confused by his sudden urge to cry.

Later that afternoon, he walked back to the shop. He had with him the flask, which he'd washed out in the stream. And the newspaper clipping. He thought the boy might find it amusing.

(vi) Genie

She had told the hotel staff about Paul. Had showed them the photo. One of the barmen shrugged.

Plenty of places to hide in Rodrigues, he said.

Yes, said Genie. What she wanted to say was, Your island is tiny. I'll find him.

There was nowhere else for Paul to run now and she could trap him: the nearest landmass was Western Australia, 4,000 miles away.

If I ask enough people, she said, someone will know.

Everyone on this island had to come to Port Mathurin at some point, the man said. And if not Paul, then someone who has seen him, at least.

The bus to Port Mathurin was old and blew out emissions so thick Genie thought instantly of some hooved animal, stamping up clouds of dust. After she had paid the conductor, a middle-aged woman with rust-coloured hair and rust-coloured eyebrows drawn in with pencil, Genie showed her the photo. She told the conductor about her search for Paul but the conductor said nothing. She had that look lost tourists wear when listening to directions they know they will forget as soon as you walk away. After that, her gaze would turn to rest on Genie, that same look, whenever she was not otherwise occupied with the other passengers – schoolchildren in dazzling white uniforms, scrawny old men in short sleeves and straw hats. You never know, thought Genie. The people you see around you. They could all be lost to someone.

Not much of a capital, Genie thought, walking the dirt-packed road which led to the centre. She passed rum shacks and women in woven hats selling lemon pickle and bottles of tiny red chillies, and remembered what Gaetan had said.

Rodrigues is like how Mauritius *used* to be, how it was fifty years ago.

Have you ever been? she asked

No, he said. But it's what everyone says.

After she'd seen Gaetan, after she had got from him all the useful information he had – Paul had come over here by ship almost two weeks ago – she'd seen no reason to stay on in Mauritius. Compared to Rodrigues, Mauritius was like New York. She had not recognised any of it from her childhood. But this island. Something

here struck her deeply. It was the slowness of the place, the unguarded manner of the people, the under-developed look of it. Rodrigues seemed more foreign to Genie, more far away from London, but it seemed more familiar too: more like the long-ago Mauritius she'd known as a child. The new Mauritius seemed almost as brusque, as wary, as littered and light-polluted and full of noise and agitation as London.

The centre of Port Mathurin was a few narrow streets laid out in a grid and lined mostly with painted zinc shacks, low cement buildings and larger, more ornate colonial buildings which were governmental residences or offices. These last were set back from the road behind high walls. Over one of these hung the branches of a frangipani tree. She caught a whiff of its scent, so strong it was almost obscene. She disliked the flowers, which were too ripe, too fleshy: they would not fade and die quietly like English flowers, but looked as though they'd go from full bloom straight to rot.

Why are you looking for him? Gaetan had asked.

Because, she'd said. He's my brother.

Rodrigues was the sister island of Mauritius and Paul, she thought, was her brother island, remote and totally isolated but somehow connected and, like Rodrigues was to Mauritius, a dependency. She realised now that she had thought this all her life: she was supposedly the baby sister, the younger one, the less clever one even. But she knew, and Paul did too, that she was the stronger one. Was this because she was younger? Paul had been alone for the first five years of his life. Her arrival must have changed his world. Genie had never known such a disruption, would never know the solitude he'd experienced before she was born. And then Genie realised – and the thought made her gasp almost – that for her it would be the opposite. She would know it if Paul were to die before her.

It was half past four in the afternoon by the time she made her way back to the bus stop. She had been waiting for twenty minutes before a young boy in school uniform walked past and asked her what she was waiting for. A bus, she told him curtly, as though he had been sarcastic. But they stopped running at four, he said. Then, with the air of someone used to being disbelieved, he sighed and asked a couple of passing schoolgirls what time the buses stopped. Each girl looked at the other, fingers buried deep in a shared bag of sweets, as though it were a trick question.

Four, they said, almost in unison, barely able to talk around the bulges in their cheeks. The boy looked at Genie as though to say, *You see!* and walked off without a word.

It did not take long after that for night to fall, for the darkness to deepen and the barking of dogs to sound louder, now that the roads were quiet. Walking back through town in search of a taxi, Genie's heart lurched with the approach of each dark figure she passed. It was at times like this that she forgot about Paul completely, thought only of the moment, of immediate dangers, though later it occurred to her that if Paul were in Port Mathurin he might only show himself when the streets were dark and empty and that perhaps one of those figures she had shrunk from had in fact been him.

(vii) Paul

He was living like a monk. He drank water from the river that failed to meet the sea. He ate food that he bought from the small shack: fried fish or dhal pancakes. He wondered what the boy had told his mother: she'd seemed tense, had avoided his eye. He would buy his food and drink from her and she would push his change towards him on the counter without looking at him. On his last trip there the woman's eyes had glittered in a funny way, as though she were about to spit on him. He did not feel like going back there again. Besides, this food was bad for him. His digestion had deteriorated. His gut would go slack and he'd get the runs or else it would knot him up with constipation. One day when he was squatting under a hibiscus bush, straining, he looked up to see two small blonde children – he couldn't tell if they were boys or girls, they were that young – staring at him. He scrambled into the bush as their mother appeared to retrieve them. He heard her scold them in some Scandinavian language. Tourists. He saw a few tourists from time to time on the beach. But soon it would be winter and sweet and mild though it was, the tourists would leave. They were like the drunks who visited curry houses in London and only wanted it hotter than they could stand it.

There might have been tourists around, but Paul was alone. And why would you say this except to mitigate the meaning of those words? You could not say them to anyone else, or at least, not to anyone you would expect to understand. If you could, the words would no longer be true. You said them to yourself, in your head, and you heard them echo. You heard the echo and you thought, I am alone.

Paul thought, how could anyone be alone with so much life around? So much insect life? If that was not a contradiction in terms.

There were ants in his shack. The cockroach he heard clatter across the packed earth of the shack's floor in the night, dead on its back by morning, the ants feasting on it.

He remembered a cockroach he'd waged war on at Rose's place, the grandmother of the two boys in Liverpool strips. He had seen it two days running in the shower hut. It sat in the corner with its face (did they have faces?) towards the wall. On the third day, Paul had had enough of it. He took the shower head, switched the water on and aimed the jet of water at the cockroach. His intention was to swill it down the drain. When it began to drift on the water in semi-circles, like a leaf in a

storm drain, it panicked, feelers plastered against its head like two wet hairs, scrabbling away from the jet of water, which Paul continued to train on it.

Paul had looked at this cockroach and its frantic efforts and felt almost a respect for it, or for life, or for its instinctive urge to live. But also disgust: why should it want to live so much? Why should the instinct to live be more developed in a cockroach than a human? The simpler the creature, it seemed, the more urgent its instinct to life. After all, didn't pandas and lions in the zoo lose the will to live sometimes? And didn't people? Paul could never imagine a cockroach pining away with loneliness.

Eventually he had given up on the cockroach, feeling sorry that he had started this, feeling pity for it or respect or annoyance because it was taking so long to die. The minute he switched off the water, the cockroach made a run up the wall and slid off, onto its back where it shuddered and twitched with a violence that led Paul to think it was finally dying. He let it be and went outside. When Paul returned the next morning it had regained consciousness and was back on its feet, in the corner, a different corner this time, staring at the wall.

He decided that he would walk to Port Mathurin later. Stock up there. Get drunk.

Out in the street the sky was like brushed steel. He could barely see in here. The girls lounging in the doorway of the rumshop had hung back to let him pass into a dark room with only one small window high up near the roof. It was small and covered in chicken wire, like the door of a rabbit-hutch. He thought about that night in Ste Croix. The stacks of rabbit hutches. There was nothing but a few rough tables and chairs inside, and a poster advertising Guinness. He sat down and ordered a drink. One of the girls looked quite young, younger than Genie. She was tall and dark with a great cloud of frizzy hair and large, shining eyes and her white dress looked whiter in the gloom of the place and against her skin. She smiled at Paul encouragingly but he turned away. He sipped at his rum, but when he next looked around for her, she was sitting at a table in the corner with a man Paul recognised as one of the sailors from the ship. The sailor looked at him and said something to the girl, laughing. He did not have the dreamy look of the fishermen Paul knew in Mauritius.

Several rums later, after the sailor had left, the girl in white came to talk to Paul. She wanted to know who he was. What he was doing here. Where he was

staying. Her questions annoyed him. I am going to tell you one thing about myself, he said. My story. I am going to tell you about my sister, he said.

When he had told her the story, she put her hand over his. He pushed it away, stood up. Staggered out into the metallic light. He stood in the doorway of the rum shop to steady himself. *Paul!* Someone was shouting his name. He thought immediately it had been a mistake to invoke Genie's name in conversation with that girl. *Paul!* A London voice. *Genie's* voice. He looked up sharply. There she was, at the end of the street. Genie. Then she was running towards him.

He ran.

(viii) Genie

Genie wandered back up along the street, ignoring the stares of everyone who'd seen her run screaming after him, the shopkeepers in their doorways, the people at the roadside stalls who had paused mid-snack, food held half-way to their mouths, to follow the chase. She had lost him by the port. Now she was on her way to that rum shop to ask about him.

A couple of girls were sitting at the rough wooden counter which passed for a bar. They seemed not to have noticed Genie.

A man came in here, Genie said, laying the photo down in front of them. I need to know where he is.

The two girls looked at one another and laughed.

He's my *brother*, Genie said. Our dad is sick. He's dying. I need to find him.

They gave her their full attention then. One of them, the younger one, a tall goofy-looking girl in a grubby white dress, spoke.

I tried to talk to him, but he wasn't very friendly. I asked where he was staying and he wouldn't say. I wanted to know what he was doing in Rodrigues and he wouldn't tell me. But he did tell me about his sister, she said.

I'm his sister.

Not you. His twin.

What are you talking about?

The operation. About the tumour. In his stomach. The one he has lived with all these years. He told us he had had this terrible pain all his life and then when he went to the doctors they told him he had a cancer but when they did some investigations on him they realised it was not a cancer but it was his twin sister. She had got stuck to him in the womb and had been growing inside him all this time. He had to have her cut out, he said. He was here to recover. He said he was full of guilt because he felt like he'd killed her. Is that true?

I can't say he was lying to you, said Genie.

(ix) Paul

Today it was diarrhoea . He squatted, felt his gut go slack, pulled some leaves from the hibiscus bush and wiped himself, shaking a little and suddenly weak. He'd go for a bathe in the sea.

He looked up at the sky. It was hard to tell what time of day it was. Today, the sky was white, harshly lit. It looked like a London sky before snowfall. He had not seen snow in a long, long time, he suddenly realised. For a second he wondered if he ever would and then he caught himself: was that it? Had he unconsciously made the decision never to go back to London?

He could not recall the first time he had ever seen snow, but the memory of Genie's first encounter with it was as vivid as if it had been his own. She was six. She had stood in the middle of the garden in her red galoshes, with her mouth open uncertain of whether to laugh or cry. And through her Paul had seen snow as if for the first time – when it settled, its static, fibrous quality, like magnetised iron filings, the way it crackled on the skin and felt rough on the tongue. Soft as fur, but ruffled, like the hackles on the back of a cat's neck. Paul felt bad for Genie when it all melted days later and the stuff turned to a dirty red brown slush and they saw what it had been covering – all the rubbish and the shit – all the rubbish and shit in the garden outside Grandmere's which Genie had always hated. She hated its long damp grass which hid, she was convinced, all manner of repulsive creatures, such as the snails that were clustered at the edge of the path. Paul would walk along it and jump with both feet onto any snails he saw, taking great delight in the crunching sound this made while Genie picked her way through them as though they were mines. If ever she trod on one she would leap up howling as though the soles of her feet had been burnt. Paul found this funny. One afternoon, he guided her towards a robin he said he could see in the bushes.

Where? she'd asked, looking up, stepping ahead, as Paul had planned.

Kerrrrrunch.

But before she could scream, the sky had ripped open and it started to rain – fat drops that fell heavily like a shower of stones. In a second they were soaked. She and Paul looked at each other, laughing with the shock of it.

Come on! he'd said, taking her hand and pulling her back towards the block. He grabbed the hem of Genie's mac which he pulled over their heads. Icy drops slid from the plastic onto their foreheads, stung numb with the cold, and as they ran up the path, he looked to see Mam at her rain-streaked window looking out at them. When they got inside she was waiting at the door with rough towels. She wrapped Genie up in one and rubbed her hard, while Paul shook himself like a dog.

Well! Mam said, Like Leda's children, in the same shell.

Paul got to his feet, dizzy, shaking, and made his way back to the shack.

Something was squatting on his chest. Or that's how it felt, anyway, when his struggle for breath shook him awake. He started to feel the panic form over him like skin on hot milk. Something was squatting on his chest and breathing in his face.

Oh God.

He didn't know what to do when it got him here, right here in bed, in the only place he felt he could escape it. There was nowhere left to go. He had to fight his way out of it. He had to think of something so that he didn't start thinking too hard about breathing and thinking that if he stopped thinking about breathing, he would stop breathing for good, and when he got to the point where he thought he was about to stop breathing he started scrabbling at the dark with his fingers, as though he were trying to slit his way through it, as though he were in mourning and rending his clothes.

He lay on the mattress, squinting at a black stain on the floor. It appeared to be dissolving, then intensifying. The ants. They were moving in the purposeful way of commuters. They could be have been people observed from a satellite. He lay there for some time watching it spread and contract, pulse of its own accord, a living, beating thing. This unnameable pain which he still carried – the name of it always on the tip of his tongue – had long since broken up and the bits floated free around his body now like clots. He watched the ants break free and wander away, the stain dissolving. He stared at them, trying to distract himself from the sound of the sea, from the fact that he remembered too much. He remembered the time he had brought Mam the daffodils. He'd looked out into the weed-choked beds of the gardens and seen them, almost hidden by the overgrown hedge. So bright, they were! So yellow against the dark wet green! And he'd run out and tugged them all up, and made a great glorious pile of them which he'd gathered, running back into the flat, into

Mam's room and she'd slapped him round the head, for pulling them all up, for dropping them on the floor, for running into her room without knocking where he had surprised her, standing naked, looking at herself in the mirror.

There were the memories. There were the ants. And then, Paul thought dully, there were the pills. He leant over to his bag and pulled it open, reaching for the tub. He twisted it open. Then he took one of the pills out and swallowed it.

(x) Genie

Genie lay by the pool in her bikini, blindly groping from time to time for the cocktail set down next to her sun-lounger. She felt the sun trail red shadows across her closed lids, and was gradually succumbing to the rum which thickened and slurred her thoughts. In a few days she would leave. She would fly back to Mauritius, and from there, home to London.

Her Mauritius, she realised, was imaginary, cobbled together from a few patchy memories and the stories she'd heard from Paul and from Mam. But Genie was more Mauritian than Paul, technically (this was only ever half the story, Mauritius, half *his* story and funny how the white half was the dark half, she thought). You could even argue that Paul was *more* Mauritian than her: he'd spent more time there. And unlike him, Genie had never felt the desire to return. Perhaps she was afraid it would disappoint her. Or perhaps she saw Mauritius as more his than hers. It was like childhood, she thought, looking at a little girl playing in the pool. You can't ever go back.

She ordered another drink.

It was layered, red and yellow. She took her swizzle stick and swirled it around. Mauritian could just be another word for 'mixed'. Their mixes were just different, that was all. Everyone was a bastard there, on that bastard island – the bastard of England and France left to grow up wild in the tropics.

Bastard, she thought.

After losing him in the street, she had lost the urge to find him. She'd given up on the day trips to Port Mathurin. No longer mentioned him to the Rodriguans she met – the chambermaids and the bar-staff and the taxi drivers who loitered round the hotel entrance.

She heard squeals and splashing and opened one eye to see the little girl paddling erratically towards a beach-ball her father had thrown into the pool. Every morning at breakfast she said *bonjour* to Genie. And Genie always offered her a small smile in return. She knew the little girl read it as sad, lonely. In fact she was simply tired: tired out by the heat, the salt air, the silence, the long hours spent alone, the efforts not to think of Paul, the rainbow of cocktails she worked her way through each afternoon by the pool.

The little girl, having reached the beachball, was now shrieking with delight and frustration, struggling to cling to it in the water as it slipped out from under her.

The further away you were from a past hurt, Genie thought, a self who got hurt in the past, the more you felt as though that self wasn't you, so much as your child, an innocent who you, as an adult, with your advanced perspective, your advantage of hindsight, should be in a position to protect. You felt outraged on your own behalf. You wanted to reach back into the past and put an arm around your shoulder and say, Hey, watch out there, be careful. You wanted to stand between you and the past hurt that you, the old you, couldn't see, and face it down. You wanted to shake your fist in its face and say, Pick on someone your own size.

Genie had become more and more angry with Paul. So what? What could she do about it now? All she knew now was, how dare he? How dare he do that to her? How dare he leave her like that? Like this? She and Mam always used to say to Paul, *You think too much*. Now Genie would have added to that, *of yourself*.

From this point on, Genie thought, she was just another tourist. She slowly sank another cocktail, her thoughts spinning madly: *Tourism is such an honest form of capitalism. You let these rich people come in, treat them like they are gods, for the price of their money you will serve them and give them anything they wish and acknowledge that they are superior. And then they're gone. You are your own people again. Your island is your own island.*

Mademoiselle?

Genie looked up into the face of the barman she had met on her first day. Dark skin kind of concentrates you, she thought sleepily, makes you occupy a more sharply-delineated space. If you were white here, you'd kind of melt into the whiteness of the sand or the sky and would be harder to see.

He handed her a piece of paper. She sat up, unfolded it. It was a hand-drawn map. She looked at him, puzzled.

My brother's sister-in-law has a small *snack* near Plaine Mapou, he said. Your brother's been there a few times. He's living nearby, on the beach.

(xi) Paul

Once, when Paul was 11 and Genie was 6, they'd found this dog, a ginger dog, lost in the street. Its tail hovered uncertainly. Genie had asked how Paul knew it was lost and Paul had said, Cos it's alone: dogs on their own are always lost. But what about cats? Genie said. Cats are different, Paul said. But why? she'd said and he'd said, Because.

The dog nosed around their legs, sniffed their feet, licked the pavement. We could keep it, maybe, said Genie, squatting down and throwing her arms around his neck, kissing his flat, greasy head. No, Paul said, feeling deep in his bristly ruff for a collar. Look. He pulled at the bronze disc that said 'Pieshop'. That's his name, Paul said. He lives in Camden. Camden Park Road. He must have been gone from home a while, Paul said, He's lost weight: look how loose his collar is. Pieshop lifted his eyes from the pavement, his gaze shifting to and from Paul's. At some angles his brown eyes had an orange glow. Like Genie's, Paul thought. Then Pieshop dipped his head. Do you think he's hungry? Genie asked. Yeah, probably, Paul said, But we don't have any money. We should just get him back to his home and then he can eat.

Before Paul realised what she was doing Genie ran up to a man in the street. She pointed at Pieshop and looked up at the man who dug in his pocket and handed her some change. Then Genie ran into a shop and came out with a Mars Bar. When it was held out to him in the palm of Genie's hand, Pieshop took up his share with a swipe of the tongue and swallowed it in one mouthful, staring up at them expectantly as they ate theirs. Genie held out her sticky hands saying, All gone, all gone. Pieshop took this as an invitation to lick her fingers.

I'm taking him back, Paul said. I want to come too, said Genie, but he said, No. Some way along York Way when she was still trailing him he stopped and let her catch up. He didn't want to lose her. OK, he said. Come, but you're not sharing my reward. I don't want any reward, she said. Will there be a reward?

They walked along the tow-path of the Union Canal, Pieshop trotting at their heels or stopping to bury his nose in god knows what, or just standing dead at the canalside, looking deep into the sour green water. What are you staring at? Paul would say, dragging him back by the collar. Fish, said Genie. There's no fish in *there*, Paul said.

It was one of those tatty terraced houses with basement flats where people walking past on the street would chuck down their burger boxes and crisp packets and

crushed-up cans. They walked up to the front door and knocked. It was opened by an old man. Pieshop! he said. But Pieshop only cowered as the old man climbed down the steps and grabbed him by the collar. Bastard dog's always running away. Thanks kids. As he was closing the door, Genie asked, Can my brother have his reward?

The old man cupped his ear and squinted: What'd you say?

My brother said you would give him a reward for bringing your dog back, said Genie. Oh, said the old man. He left the door open and went into the house, Pieshop following him tail down. The old man came back with two oranges. There you go, he said, closing the door.

What kind of a reward is that? Paul said, looking at his orange in disgust. It was the kind with thin skin that hurt your thumbs to peel. As they were standing there, they heard the man shouting, then heard Pieshop emit a yelp. Oh, cried Genie, That was Pieshop! Genie started to sob. Do something, Paul. He shrugged. I can't, he said. He doesn't belong to us.

Then Paul threw his orange as hard as he could and watched it burst and dribble down the old man's door. And then Genie threw *her* orange and it fell short and rolled away back down the steps towards them and they looked at each other and Paul grabbed Genie's hand and they ran.

Look at me, bringing poisoned apples into Paradise! Paul thought, reaching for another pill. There was a time when he debased his coinage, he cut his drugs, crushed them to dust, sold them as space dust. Dust from space was radioactive. And people who took this stuff glowed in the dark. They emitted heat. There was an expression in Creole, *pas cause*: Don't talk. It implied absolute agreement with what someone had just said: I know what you mean.

The first time he and Sol had taken an E together – Paul's first ever time – out in that field, the grass brushing his ankles like Eloise's long hair, the sky frosted with stars, they had looked at one other and said nothing. And then he had in turn introduced El to Es in another wordless, but eloquent encounter. To think they had ever called that stuff Ecstasy, he laughed. How naive we were. And these days it was more Mild Excitability. Not even that, he thought, thinking about the increasingly frequent waves of paranoia that had licked the edges of his consciousness whenever he popped pills in London. Was it him that had changed though, or the pills? Maybe kids who took this stuff still found it Ecstatic. But no, the scene had definitely

deteriorated along with the quality of the drugs: there had been an innocence about it (or had it been about them?) that had been cut with something cruder, over the years. When had that happened, exactly?

Now as he took another one of the pills, he didn't talk. But the sea would not shut up. The sound of it was beginning to engulf him. It was ceaseless. For variety he imagined that the noise outside was rain. It could have been rain or the wind in the coconut trees, the flapping of ragged banana leaves or the sound in his ears that he heard when he listened to shells or when he couldn't sleep at night. Like tonight. Like every night. Anything but the sea.

There was a bush by his shack. Paul had no idea what it was, but the needles were spiny, as spiteful-looking as the black railings he used to see everywhere in London. When it rained heavily, the sound of the drops on its whip-like branches was like a large animal drinking, lapping something up. And the wind sometimes sounded like it was drumming at his door (the piece of zinc he had to drag open or closed), demanding to be let in. But he swallowed it. Paul realised, when it came down to hardships you couldn't change, mistakes you couldn't undo, you just had to swallow it.

He dreamt she'd come to see him. He'd seen her a long way down the beach, could see her mouth open, knowing that she was calling to him, but could hear nothing for a while, and then he heard his name. It had seemed ages since he'd heard his own name from someone else's lips.

She'd come running across the wet sand towards him and when he came down to meet her and she leapt into his arms she'd felt more solid than she'd ever felt in real life. She was sobbing, and when finally she'd stopped crying it had started to rain and so he'd grabbed her hand and they'd run into the hut and the sound of it on the roof was like the sudden applause you heard at the end of something dramatic. Then she'd asked him to go back with her. Told him it would be better for him that way, that if he was sorry about what he'd done to Genie, if he wanted things to change, then this was his chance. He could not remember much of what he'd said, only that he could not go back and then she'd looked at him, quite closely, asking where it had all gone wrong, had asked in fact what was wrong with him. And when she asked, he couldn't tell her. He couldn't tell her. Come with me, she'd said. And he'd said,

Alright. But just one more day here alone before I face everything I ran away from.
And then he'd asked her if she remembered Pieshop. No, she'd said, I don't.
He'd woken up alone, terrified, thinking Where do I go now.

(xii) Genie

She dreamt she'd found him. She'd taken him for a tree at first – one which might have escaped the cyclone, it was so slight. And then, walking closer along the beach she saw it was a man, and then she saw in this figure a much thinner, darker version of Paul, his profile smudged by the grown-out hair, the beard. He was standing on a ledge of land which stuck out over the sea, just looking out, as though scanning the horizon for a ship, as though watching the sun set, but now all that could be seen of it was a bar of hot light at the horizon, and the sky, gradually deepening.

Paul!

Running as she was screaming, hoarsely, out of breath, over the sand which was packed hard and cold where the sea had rolled over it, her bare feet slapping flat on it, sandals in hand, like running on rain-wetted London pavements. He did not turn around immediately, as though the sound of her cry took a long while to reach him.

Paul!

He saw her and moved slowly down towards the beach where she running up to meet him. Without a word he stepped forward and when she folded him into her arms she was shocked to discover how little of him there was left.

(xiii) Paul

There were more and more tourists around. Paul saw them walking along the beach and they looked up and saw him, with his beard, standing against the lilac sky, under the roiling, boiling biblical clouds. They never approached. Paul shook his fist and thought, What a triumph of Heaven over Earth!

The sky was electric! All glare and clouds, the sky frowned with clouds.

He felt like one of the Desert Fathers...deserting fathers. That was what he thought when he thought, if at all, about the man who had fathered him. The desert fathers were not fathers, they were as barren as the desert itself. Oh yes, in another life, they may have had children, wives, livestock, unpaid taxes, unupportable debts... but here, in the desert, they were free. They were alone. Or so they thought. But it got so that the desert was getting pretty crowded back then. You couldn't move for men with fire in their eyes and beards down to their bellies. It was like base camp at K2 or certain satellite-congested areas of outer space. Filled with lots of men wanting to be alone.

He couldn't be sure but he thought he'd been here for some time now. It could have been weeks. Perhaps months. Had he come here to lose himself or find something? God, perhaps? If so, Paul had not found him. Not in the empty, endless sky, the stony, sparsely-seeded ground that stretched red and cracked as a washer-woman's hands. It was not as lonely as you'd think, he thought, the desert. So far he had encountered other men, hermits like himself, stripped to the waist, their scrubby beards hanging down their chests. They did not acknowledge him as they passed, respectful of his solitude; they scuttled across his horizon, anxious not to disturb his view or block his light. But he wanted to stop them as they passed, wanted to stay them with his scrawny grip, tight as an old man's or a newborn's or a madman's and tell them, *Don't go*. The devil appeared to him at noon, shimmering in the heat haze, his eyes the size and colour of gooseberries. The world was a desert full of men wanting to be alone.

Here in the desert, water was scarce so he didn't wash. And washing off this red dirt which had settled on his skin like brick dust after a demolition would distance him from his environment, his purpose: would make him less of an element of his

surroundings and more like an intruder – a figure which had been crudely superimposed on a masterfully-executed landscape. The smell of him made him feel less alone. His body was like a forest of smells. But the memories: these made him feel more alone. When a man was shipwrecked, even in the desert, all his memories returned to him. His memory became as pin-sharp as the desert island sun and nothing escaped its glare. And it was like that when you drowned, of course – your life flashed before your eyes. Once was enough! you thought, as you lived through it all again, drowning in memory, a wine-dark sea, and they crowded in on you, breathlessly, the memories – once was enough! But then, wading into the black sea, wading into the night, gasping with cold, watching the dust melt away and your skin come up glittery with salt, slippery as a newborn's – as you waded out to the point where your feet floated free and you lost touch with the earth, like walking on water, like dreams of flying, as you gradually found yourself out of your depth and the water closed over your head, stinging your eyes, like crying in reverse and you started to swallow your tears, the thoughts burst like bubbles in your mouth and filled your lungs and it all flashed before you - once was enough, but then you were glad to know at last, after a life of searching, the moment when everything went wrong.