

MOHAMED MBOUGAR SARR

The Most Secret Memory of Men

'A love letter
to literature . . .
it will haunt you'
LEÏLA SLIMANI



The
Most Secret Memory
of Men

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The Most Secret Memory of Men

Mohamed Mbougar Sarr

Translated from the French
by Lara Vergnaud



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For Yambo Ouologuem

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For some time, the Critique accompanies the Work, then the Critique fades away and it is the Readers who accompany it. The journey can be long or short, then the Readers die one by one and the Work continues alone, although another Critique and other Readers gradually accompany it on its voyage. Then the Critique dies again and the Readers die again, and on that trail of bones the Work continues its journey toward Solitude. To approach it, to sail in its wake is an unmistakable sign of certain death, but another Critique and other Readers approach it tirelessly and relentlessly, and time and speed devour them. Finally the Work travels unavoidably alone in the Vastness. And one day the Work dies, as all things die, as the Sun and the Earth, the Solar System and the Galaxy and the most secret memory of men will be extinguished.

—ROBERTO BOLAÑO, *The Savage Detectives*

Book One



PART ONE

The Spider-Mother's Web

August 27, 2018

Of a writer and their work, we can at least know this: together, they make their way through the most perfect labyrinth imaginable, the path long and circular, and their destination the same as their starting point: solitude.

I'm leaving Amsterdam. Despite everything I've learned in this city, I still can't decide if I know Elimane any better or if his mystique has merely grown. It would be appropriate here to evoke the paradox of any quest for knowledge: the more you discover about a little piece of the world, the clearer the vastness of the unknown and of your ignorance becomes; except that equation would only partially convey my feelings toward this man. His case demands a more radical formula, meaning more pessimistic about the very possibility of comprehending a human soul. His resembles an occluded star; it mesmerizes and devours everything that comes near. You examine his life for a time and, pulling back, serious and resigned and old, perhaps desperate even, you whisper: The human soul can't be understood, it won't be understood.

Elimane sank into the depths of his Night. The ease of his farewell to the sun fascinates me. The willing embrace

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of his shadow fascinates me. The mystery of his destination haunts me. I don't know why he stopped speaking when he had so much left to say. But mainly, it pains me that I can't do the same. Encountering someone who's gone silent, truly silent, invariably prompts reflection about the meaning—the necessity—of your own words, as you suddenly wonder whether it's all just worthless babbling, linguistic sludge.

Time to shut my mouth and pause this diary. The Spider-Mother's stories tired me out. Amsterdam emptied me. The path of solitude awaits.

I

T.C. Elimane offered the African authors of my generation, who can't be described as young for much longer, the chance to tear each other limb from limb in pious and bloody literary jousts. His book was both cathedral and arena; we entered it as if entering a god's tomb and ended up kneeling in our own blood, offered as libation to the masterpiece. A single page was enough to assure us that we were reading a writer, a hapax, one of those celestial bodies that only appear once in the literary heavens.

I remember one of the many dinner parties we spent with his book. The discussion grew heated, and Béatrice—the sensual, dynamic Béatrice Nanga who I hoped would one day asphyxiate me between her breasts—had said, ever combative, that only the works of true writers merited venomous debate, that they alone boiled the blood like wood alcohol and that if, in an attempt to conciliate that flabby, spineless creature we call general opinion, we avoided the impassioned clashes they provoked, we were doing a dishonor to literature itself. A true writer, she had added, sparks fatal disagreements among true readers, who are forever at war; if you're not willing to fight to the death for an author's carcass, like in a game of *buzkashī*, then fuck off and go drown yourself in that warm puddle of piss you take

for quality beer: you're anything but a reader, much less a writer.

I had backed Béatrice Nanga in her dramatic charge. T.C. Elimane wasn't classic, he was cult. Literary mythos is a gaming table. Elimane sat at that table and laid down the three most powerful trump cards there are: first, he chose a name with mysterious initials; then, he only wrote a single book; finally, he disappeared without leaving a trace. So, yes, it was worth sticking your neck out in an attempt to grab hold of his carcass.

It was possible to doubt whether a man named T.C. Elimane had truly existed at one time, or to wonder if that was a pseudonym invented by an author to mess with (or escape) the literary world. No one, however, could have disputed the powerful truth of his book: after reading the final page, violent, pure life would come coursing back through your veins.

Knowing if Homer was a real person, yes or no, remains an interesting question. But in the end, it changes little of his reader's marvelment; for it is to Homer, whoever or whatever he was, that the reader owes thanks for having written *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Likewise, the person, hoax, or legend behind T.C. Elimane mattered little; it was to that name that we were indebted for the work that changed our perspective on literature. Perhaps on life. *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*: that was its title, and we went to its pages like manatees straight to the water's source.

In the beginning, there was a prophecy and there was a King; and the prophecy told the King that the earth would grant him absolute power but demand, in return, the ashes

of old men and women, to which the King agreed; he immediately started to burn the elders of his kingdom, before scattering their remains around his palace, where, soon, a forest, a macabre forest, grew, which would be called the labyrinth of inhumanity.

II

How did we meet, this book and I? By chance, like everyone else. Though I haven't forgotten what the Spider-Mother told me: chance is always merely a fate unknown to us. My first reading of *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* is very recent, just over a month ago. But to say that Elimane was completely unknown to me before that reading would be wrong: in high school, already, I knew his name. It was listed in *The Reader's Guide to Negro Literature*, one of those ineradicable anthologies that have been used as reference books for schoolchildren in francophone Africa since colonial times.

It was 2008, my junior year at a military boarding school in northern Senegal. Literature was beckoning, and I developed the adolescent dream of becoming a poet, a completely banal ambition when you're discovering the greatest among them and living in a country still haunted by Senghor's cumbrous ghost; in other words, a country where a poem remained one of the most reliable tools in the arsenal of seductions. It was an era when you could pick up a girl with a quatrain, memorized or made up.

Accordingly, I began to immerse myself in poetic anthologies, in dictionaries of synonyms, rare words, rhymes too. Mine were terrible, interspersed through wobbly hendecasyllables full of "tears bereft" and "skies dehiscent,"

of “hyaline dawns.” I parodied, perverted, plagiarized. I frenetically leafed through my *Guide to Negro Literature*. Which was where, alongside classics of black literature, between Tchichellé Tchivéla and Tchicaya U Tam’si, I first stumbled upon the unknown name of T.C. Elimane. The corresponding commentary was so distinctive from the rest of the anthology that I lingered on it. The entry read (I kept my textbook):

T.C. Elimane was born in Senegal. He received a scholarship and moved to Paris, where, in 1938, he published a book whose fate proved unusual and tragic: The Labyrinth of Inhumanity.

And what a book! The masterpiece of a young African Negro! A first in France! The novel ignited the kind of literary quarrel for which that country alone has the aptitude and the appetite.

The Labyrinth of Inhumanity counted as many supporters as it did detractors. But though there was talk of prestigious prizes destined for the author and his book, a mysterious literary scandal stopped the rumors cold. The work was pilloried. As for its young author, he disappeared from the literary scene.

Then the war broke out. After 1938, no one heard from this T.C. Elimane again. His fate remains a mystery, despite some interesting hypotheses (on this topic, see, for example, the short but edifying account by the journalist B. Bollème, Who Was the True Negro Rimbaud? Odyssey of a Ghost, Éditions de la Sonde, 1948). Besmirched by the scandal, the publisher took the book off the shelves and destroyed all its remaining copies. The Labyrinth of Inhumanity was never reissued. Today, the work is unobtainable.

It bears repeating: this precocious writer had talent. A touch of genius perhaps. It's unfortunate that he used it in service of a portrait of despair: his bleak book nourished the colonial vision of Africa as a place of darkness, as violent and barbaric. A continent that had already suffered so much, that was suffering and would continue to suffer, was entitled to expect its authors to paint a more positive picture of it.

Those passages immediately sent me down Elimane's dusty trail, or rather, his ghost's trail. I spent weeks trying to find out what became of him, but the Internet didn't tell me anything that the textbook hadn't already. There were no photos of Elimane. The few sites that mentioned him did so in such an allusive way that I quickly understood they didn't know any more than I did. Nearly all of them spoke of a "shameful African writer from the interwar period" without noting what, exactly, was the source of his shame. I wasn't able to learn more about his book either. I couldn't find a single account that explored it in depth; no studies or dissertations on it existed.

I mentioned the book to a friend of my father's, a professor of African literature. He told me that Elimane's fleeting existence in French letters (he made sure to emphasize "French") prevented his novel from being discovered in Senegal. "It was written by a eunuch god. People sometimes talk about *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* like it's a sacred book. The truth is that it didn't inspire a religion. Nobody believes in the book anymore. Maybe no one ever did."

My search was limited by the fact that I was at that military boarding school in the middle of the bush. I stopped looking and resigned myself to a simple and cruel truth:

Elimane had been erased from literary memory, but also, it would appear, from all of human memory, including that of his compatriots (though everyone knows that it's always your compatriots who forget you first). *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* belonged to the other history of literature (which is perhaps the *true* history of literature): that of books lost in a corridor of time, not cursed even, simply forgotten, and whose corpses, bones, and solitudes blanket the floors of prisons without jailers, and line infinite and silent frozen paths.

I pulled myself away from that sad history and went back to writing love poems in my shaky lines of verse.

In the end, my only major discovery, on an obscure online forum, was the long first sentence of *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*, seemingly the sole survivor of the book's obliteration seventy years prior: *In the beginning, there was a prophecy and there was a King; and the prophecy told the King that the earth would grant him absolute power but demand, in return, the ashes of old men and women, and so on.*

III

And now here is how *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* came back into my life.

Following my first encounter with Elimane in high school, some time went by before I found myself contending with him again. Of course I had thought about him, but only on occasion and always with a touch of sadness, the way you remember stories that are unfinished or unfinishable—an old friend lost, a manuscript destroyed in a fire, a love rejected out of fear of finally being happy. I passed the baccalaureate, left Senegal, and moved to Paris to continue my studies.

Once here, I briefly resumed my research on Elimane, without success: the book was still impossible to find, even among booksellers who supposedly had impressive inventories. As for B. Bollème's opusculé, *Who Was the True Negro Rimbaud?*, I was informed that it hadn't been reissued since the mid-1970s. My studies and life as an immigrant soon steered me away from *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*, a phantom book whose author appeared to have been a mere flick of a match in the deep literary night. And so, little by little, I forgot them.

The course of my studies in France led me to a dissertation on literature that quickly began to feel like an exile from the writer's Eden. I became a lazy doctoral student,

rapidly diverted from the noble path of academia by what was no longer a passing temptation but a desire as pretentious as it was certain: to become a novelist. They warned me: You might never succeed in literature. You might end up bitter! disappointed! marginalized! a failure! Yes, it's possible, I said. The relentless "they" insisted: Maybe you'll end up suicidal! Yes, maybe, but life, I added, is nothing more than a series of "maybes," a slip of a word and yet it can carry so much. I hope it holds my weight but tough luck if it gives way, in which case I'll get to see what lives or rots below. And then I suggested that "they" go to hell. I told them: No one ever succeeds in literature, so you can take your success and shove it wherever you like.

I wrote a little novel, *Anatomy of the Void*, which I published with a fairly small press. The book was a flop (seventy-nine copies sold the first two months, including the ones I bought out of my own pocket). And yet one thousand one hundred and eighty-two people had liked the post I put on Facebook to announce the pending publication of my book. Nine hundred and nineteen had left a comment. "Congratulations!" "Proud of you!" "Awesome, bro!" "Bravo!" "An inspiration!" "Thank you, brother. You do us proud," "Can't wait to read it, *inshallah*!" "When's it out?" (even though I had included the publication date in the post), "How can I get it?" (also in the post), "How much does it cost?" (same), "Interesting title!" "You're a role model for our youth!" "What's it about?" (this question embodies the Evil in literature), "Can I order it?" "Is there a PDF?" et cetera. Seventy-nine copies.

I had to wait four or five months after the novel's publication for it to be rescued from the purgatory of anonymity. An

influential journalist, a specialist of so-called francophone literature, reviewed it in twelve hundred characters, including spaces, in *Le Monde* (the “Africa” section). He voiced a few reservations about my style, but his final sentence stuck me with the formidable, dangerous, actually maybe even diabolical label of “a francophone African writer full of promise.” Granted, I had avoided the terrible and fatal “rising star,” but his praise was no less murderous. It was enough to earn me, as a result, a certain kind of attention in the literary world of Paris’s African diaspora—the Ghetto, as it’s affectionately called by certain shit-talkers, including me. From that moment on, even people who hadn’t read my work, and undoubtedly never would, knew, from a tiny review in *Monde Afrique*, that I was the umpteenth new young writer to arrive, dripping with promise. At the festivals, meet and greets, literary fairs, and salons to which I was invited, I became the obvious addition to those irradicable roundtables titled “New Voices” or “The New Guard” or “New Writers to Watch” or whatever else was supposedly new in literature but that, in reality, already seemed so old and tired. The minor buzz reached Senegal, my country, where people began to take an interest in me because Paris had, which served as an imprimatur. From that point on, *Anatomy of the Void* got talked about (“talked about” not meaning read).

All the same, the novel had left me unsatisfied, unhappy perhaps. Soon I felt ashamed of *Anatomy of the Void*—which I wrote for reasons that I will explain later—and, as if to purge myself of it or bury it, I began dreaming of another great novel, which would be ambitious and decisive. I just had to write it.

IV

And it was precisely that, write my great masterpiece, that I had been trying to do for one month when, one July evening, unable to think of the first sentence, I escaped to the streets of Paris. I wandered, on the lookout for a miracle. It appeared to me, on the other side of a bar window, when I recognized Marème Siga D., a Senegalese writer in her sixties whose every book had caused such scandal that, for some, she'd come to be viewed as an evil Pythia, a ghoul, or an outright succubus. I, however, saw her as an angel: the black angel of Senegalese literature, which would have otherwise become a deadly cesspit of boredom in which float, like listless specks of shit, those books that inevitably open with descriptions of an eternal sun "casting its rays through the foliage," or the sight of that one-size-fits-all storybook face with its "prominent" cheekbones, "Grecian" (or "broad") nose, and "protruding" or "imposing" forehead. Siga D. was saving contemporary Senegalese literature from pestilential embalmment in clichés and expressions that had been sucked dry, devitalized like old, rotten teeth. As it happened, she had left Senegal to write a book whose sole offense to moral sensibilities was radical honesty. That had earned her a cultlike status—and a few legal proceedings, which she always attended without a lawyer.

She usually lost them. But, she would maintain, what I have to say is right here, in my life, so I'll keep on writing it, and to hell with your pathetic attacks.

So, I recognized Siga D. I entered the bar and sat near her. Apart from us, there were three or four customers spread out inside. The rest had gone to the terrace in search of some air. Siga D. was alone at her table, perfectly still. She looked like a lioness lying in wait for her prey, hidden in the tall grass, tearing apart the steppe with big, yellow eyes. The seeming coldness of her demeanor clashed with the fierceness of her works, the memory of which—sumptuous and pelean pages, pages of flint and diamonds—cast doubt in my mind, briefly, that this impassive woman was the one who had written them.

At that exact moment, Siga D. moved her arm to push up the sleeve of her grand boubou. Through the gap in the garment, a matter of seconds, I glimpsed her breasts. They loomed as though at the end of a tunnel or maybe a long waiting room, a waiting room of desire. Siga D. had written memorable paragraphs about those breasts, blazons worthy of the most torrid anthologies of erotic texts. And so there I found myself before a chest enshrined in literary posterity. Countless readers had imagined that same ample bosom, and many had developed robust fantasies accordingly. I summoned my own. The arm dropped and sent the chest back into hiding.

I took my courage in one hand, threw back my drink with the other, and then I approached Siga D. I introduced myself, Diégane Latyr Faye, I said that I loved her writing, that I was overwhelmed to see her in person, that I found her personality fascinating, that I was impatient to read her

next book, in short, the muddle of formulaic praise that her admirers must have showered on her at every encounter; then, seeing her look of annoyed politeness, the kind people get when they want to send away a nuisance without having to tell them, I went for broke and brought up her chest, which I had just glimpsed and would have liked to see again.

She blinked in surprise; a breach formed, I dove in: Your breasts are truly sublime, Madame Siga.

“Did you like what you saw?” she said calmly. “Yes, I liked it very much and I want more.” “More?” “More.” “Why?” “Because I’m hard.” “Seriously, Diégane Latyr Faye? Doesn’t take you much, young man!” “Yes, I know, Madame Siga, I’ve been obsessed with your breasts for so long, you have no idea.” “Stop being so formal, stop calling me Madame Siga, it’s ridiculous, and also, lose the hard-on, let the air out, *mënn na la jurr*, I could be your mother, Diégane.” “*Kone nampal ma*, then suckle me like a mother,” I responded, like when I was a teenager and girls would reject my advances (or fail to understand my hendecasyllabic poems), judging, because they were four or five years older than me, that they could have given birth to me.

Siga D. looked at me for a moment and, for the first time, she smiled.

“Ah, so the kid’s quick on the draw, huh? The kid talks a big talk, huh? You want to suckle. All right. Follow me. My hotel is a few minutes away. *Inshallah* the kid gets to suckle.”

She started to rise, then paused. “Unless you’d prefer that I *nampal* you here and now?”

This offer was made concrete when a second later she pulled the neck of her billowy boubou low on her chest; one

heavy breast, the left, sprung from the loosened top. “You want?” said Siga D. “Here it is.” The revelation: the large medallion of her areola gleaming; a brown island amid an ocean of abundance in lighter hues. Siga D. watched me, head tilted to her right, impassive and seemingly indifferent to everything else. She could have easily played up the shock value, the crudeness almost, of her gesture, but quite the opposite: this wanton voluptuousness was displayed with restraint, which I even soon deemed elegant. “Well? You want it or not?” She grabbed her breast. She massaged it slowly. After a few seconds, I said I’d rather suckle in the privacy of the hotel. “What a shame,” she responded in an alarmingly gentle tone, and she put away her breast before standing up. The smell of cinnamon and myrrh filled the air. I paid. I followed her.

V

We reached the hotel where she was staying for the few days she was in Paris to attend a symposium dedicated to her writing. But this is my last night here, she told me as she called the elevator. I'm going home tomorrow, to Amsterdam. So it's tonight or never, Diégane Latyr Faye.

She entered the elevator, a terrible smile on her lips. As we rose to the thirteenth floor, I plunged, toward utter ruin. Siga D.'s body had known, done, tried everything: What could I offer her? Where could I take her? What could I think up? Who did I think I was? Those philosophers who extol the inexhaustible virtues of erotic inventiveness never had to deal with a Siga D., whose mere presence wiped away my sexual history. How should I go about it? The fourth floor already. She won't feel anything, she won't even feel you enter, your body will liquefy against hers, it will trickle down and be absorbed by the sheets, by the mattress. Seventh. You won't just drown inside of her, you'll disappear, disintegrate, crumble, she's going to obliterate you, and the pieces that are left will drift into the clinamen of the ancient materialists, Leucippus, Democritus of Abdera (whose only equal when it comes to philosophy was Empedocles), not to mention Lucretius, the noble expositor of the pleasure-seeking Epicurus

exalted in *De rerum natura*. Tenth. Boredom, deadly boredom, that's all you can promise her.

It was warm, I broke into a cold sweat, and Siga D. could have sent me flying with a flick of her fingers, with a single breath, like a fragile spikelet. To boost myself, I thought about the Rabelaisian suckling to come, about the literary bosom. But instead of helping, that image set me to obsessing about an even greater weakness: my hands struck me as absurdly harmless and small before the writer's breasts, worthless hands incapable of desire; stumps. As for my tongue, I didn't even dream of using it: the poetic teats had already tied it in knots. I was fucked.

Thirteenth floor. The elevator doors opened, Siga D. walked out without looking at me, turned left, and, for a few seconds, I could no longer hear her footsteps, which were absorbed by the thick carpeting in the hallway; then came the sound of a bolt opening at the touch of a magnetic card, before the silence returned. I had remained in the elevator, where I finally released the gas I had been holding in since the first floor to protect my dignity. I considered flight. Though flight wasn't the right word, given that, we both knew, I had lost before the battle even began. If I had left, it would have merely been the sad but predictable conclusion to my defeat, the consummation of my foreshadowed trouncing. The elevator was called to the lobby. The doors began to close. I stopped them at the last second and walked out, driven less by courage than by an obscure desire to experience a crushing vanquishment.

So, I made my way down the hallway. A door had been left ajar, allowing that same aroma of cinnamon and myrrh to escape, as either invitation or warning. I didn't push it

open, as though the door was in fact the gateway to hell. I waited there, dumb and motionless. The hallway light eventually switched off. I took one step forward; it came back on; I crossed the threshold. A room in pastel tones welcomed me, luxurious and impersonal. For a second, through the large sliding door that opened onto a balcony, I saw Paris sparkling. The sound of water: Siga D. was taking a shower. I breathed: a little respite before the moment of truth.

I was struck less by the size of the bed, improbably large as it was, than by the kitsch factor of the painting proudly hanging above it. Any artist who so superficially enhances (meaning disfigures) the world shouldn't be allowed to keep on living, I thought. I looked away, flopped onto the gigantic bed, and sent my thoughts on a suicide mission to the ceiling. Several possible scenarios of what was to come were playing out in front of me. They all ended the same way: I would step over the balcony railing and leap into the void, to the sound of pitiless laughter coming from Siga D., who hadn't sensed a thing. She emerged from her shower fifteen minutes later. A white towel, which came to her thighs, was knotted at her chest; another was wrapped around her head like a sultana's turban.

"Oh, you're still here, huh."

From the tone of her voice, I didn't know if this was a cold observation, an unexpected discovery, a devastatingly ironic comment, or even a question. Any of those options could have harbored terrifying innuendos. I didn't answer. She smiled. I watched her go back and forth between the bedroom and the bathroom. Siga D.'s body was clearly that of a mature woman who had never retreated from either pleasure or pain. Hers was a beauty entangled with suffering;

an immodest body, tried and tested; a body without harshness but one that wasn't frightened by the harshness of the world. It sufficed to see it, truly, to understand it. I watched Siga D. and I knew the truth: this wasn't a human being I had before me, but a spider, the Spider-Mother, whose vast composition was interwoven with millions of threads of silk but also of steel and maybe blood, and I was merely a fly mired in that web, a fascinated and fat, green-hued fly, caught in Siga D., in the lattice and density of her lives.

Then passed those long minutes during which certain women, after their shower, do a thousand things that appear to be of the utmost importance, without anyone knowing exactly what. She eventually sat down in the armchair in front of me, still covered by a single towel. It inched up, I saw her upper thighs, then her hips, and, finally, her pubic mound. I made no attempt to look away and stared at her bush for a moment. I wanted to see her Eye. She crossed her legs, and the memory of Sharon Stone abruptly paled in my mind.

"I bet you're a writer. Or an aspiring writer. Don't act so surprised. I've learned to recognize your kind at first glance. They look at things like they all contain some profound secret. They see a woman's vagina and contemplate it like that's where the key to their mystery is hidden. They aestheticize. But a pussy is just a pussy. There's no need to drool out your poetry or your life philosophy while you feast your eyes on it. You can't live in the moment and write it at the same time."

"Of course you can. That's what it means to live as a writer. Make every moment of life a moment to write. See everything with a writer's eyes and..."

“There’s your mistake. There’s the mistake every guy like you makes. You all believe that literature fixes life. Or completes it. Or replaces it. You’re wrong. Writers, and I’ve known many, have always been among the most mediocre lovers I’ve ever encountered. Do you know why? When they have sex, they’re already thinking about the scene the experience will turn into. Every caress is ruined by what their imagination is doing or will do with it, every thrust is weakened by a sentence. When I talk to them during sex, I can almost hear their ‘she murmured.’ They live in chapters. Quotation marks precede every word they say. *Als het erop aan komt*—that’s Dutch, it means ‘at the end of the day’—writers like you are stuck in their make-believe. You’re permanent narrators. It’s life that matters. The work only comes after. The two don’t mix. Ever.”

An interesting and debatable theory to which I was no longer listening. Siga D.’s towel was now almost undone. She had uncrossed her legs. Her open towel revealed nearly her entire body: her stomach, her waist, every inscription on her skin... Only her breasts remained hidden by two final bits of towel. As for the Eye, I could see it clearly, and it was out of the question that mine blinked first.

“Look at you. You’re thinking up sentences this very second. Bad sign. If you want to write a good novel, forget it for now. You want to fuck me, right? Yes, you do. I’m here. Focus on that. On me.”

She rose from the armchair, came closer, leaned her face over mine. Her towel came completely undone; her chest emerged; she pressed it against mine.

“Otherwise, get out of here and go write another little shit novel.”

I found the provocation kind of juvenile and threw Siga D. onto the bed. The expression on her face (triumph, pleasure, defiance) filled me with raging desire. I began kissing her breasts. I gave it my all and managed to get a few moans out of her, or more precisely, protomoans. At least that's what I told myself. Real or imagined, they galvanized me. I, the fly, was near the center of the web, near the lethal and obscure center of the Spider-Mother's home. I wanted to slip toward the Eye. But just then she stopped me and rolled me onto my side like a child; with humiliating ease and a burst of laughter; she stood and began to put her clothes on.

A wave of intense anger rising inside me, I wanted to have another go. But knowing how ridiculous I surely appeared in that instant held me back. I shut my mouth and kept it shut. Then Siga D. began to sing slowly in Serer. I stretched out to listen and, little by little, the room, which until then had exuded icy comfort, became alive and sad and populated by memories. The song spoke of an old fisherman readying his small boat before confronting a fish-goddess.

I closed my eyes. Siga D. finished getting dressed as she hummed the last verse. The boat sailed off across the calm ocean and the fisherman scanned the horizon with hard, glistening eyes, prepared to face the mythical goddess. He didn't look back at the shore, where his wife and children were watching him. At the very end, *Sukk lé joot Kata maag, Roog soom a yooniin*, "His pirogue passed behind the ocean, and God was his only company." The instant Siga D. stopped singing, a terebrant sadness filled the room.

It persisted for several seconds, and I could almost feel its heft, make out its smell, when Siga D. invited me to sit

on the balcony, where we would both feel better. She had brought some excellent weed from Amsterdam, which she packed herself, with the indolent nimbleness of habit, into a large and rather intimidating joint, of which I'd never seen the like, which we smoked as we discussed serious things and frivolous things, the thousand masks of life, the sadness at the heart of all beauty, a truly enormous joint, and quality weed. I asked her if she knew the rest of the story about the fisherman and the mythical goddess.

"No, Diégane. I don't think there's any more to it. One of my stepmothers, Ta Dib, used to sing it to me when I was a child. She always sang it that way."

Siga D. had paused briefly, then told me that there didn't need to be any more to it because everyone, *als het erop aan komt*, knew the end of the story, which could only conclude in one way. I agreed with her. There was only one possible ending. The gleam of the joint between my fingers went out just then. In all my life, I had rarely felt so relaxed. I looked up at the sky, a starless sky veiled by something—not a procession of clouds, no, another expanse, vast and deep, that looked like the shadow of a gigantic creature flying over the earth.

"It's God," I had said. I stopped talking for a moment before resuming, in a calm, low voice (I don't think that I ever again experienced the unprecedented and unjustifiable sensation that I had then, the sensation that I was within reach of the Truth): "It's God. He's very close tonight, in fact, I don't think He's been this close to us in a long time. But He knows. He knows that coming would destroy Him, once and for all. He's not well armed enough yet to confront His biggest nightmare: Us. Man."

“So you’re one of those people who turn into metaphysician-theologists when they smoke weed,” murmured Siga D.

More silence, then she said, “Hang on.” She went into the bedroom, rummaged through her purse, and returned with a book in her hand. She sat back down, opened the book at random, and said, “We can’t end this night without reading a little literature, without sacrificing a few pages to the god of poets,” then she began to read: three pages were enough to send shivers through my whole body.

“I know. It’s better than a joint,” she said, closing the book.

“What the hell was that?”

“*The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*.”

“Impossible.”

“Sorry?”

“Impossible. *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* is a myth. T.C. Elimane is a eunuch god.”

“You know Elimane?”

“I know of him. I had *The Reader’s Guide to Negro Literature*. I looked for that book for . . . I . . .”

“Do you know the history of this book?”

“*The Reader’s Guide* said that . . .”

“Forget *The Reader’s Guide*. Did you look yourself? Yes, you must have tried. But you didn’t find anything. Obviously. No one finds anything. Except I almost did. I got close. But the path is winding. Long. Sometimes deadly. You search for T.C. Elimane, and a silent precipice suddenly opens beneath your feet like an upside-down sky. Like a gaping, bottomless mouth. That abyss opened before me too. I tumbled. The fall came . . . the fall . . .”

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"...and I lived through it. Life took unexpected directions, my thread got lost in the sands of time, and I no longer had the courage to keep looking."

"For who? For what? And first off, how did you get the book? What proves that this is in fact *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*?"

"...I never told anyone what I lived or almost lived with him. It's always felt like a blind spot in my life, the invisible horizon..."

"You smoked too much."

"...but also the spot I see the clearest, the looming horizon...and if I can pick up the thread of that story, I'll have gone farther than I ever have into the foreign land that's inside of me and which he inhabits..."

"You're out of your mind."

"...and I will have descended into the heart of what I really have to write: my book about Elimane. But for now, I'm not ready. As for the circumstances in which I got this book...It's not a story that I can tell you, Diégane Faye. Not today, in any case. Not yet."

Siga D. stopped speaking and turned her head toward the city, but it was obvious to me that she saw none of the glimmers of light popping up here and there, like a constellation of precious gems, across the center of Paris. Her gaze was directed inward, toward the glimmers or twilights of her past. I didn't attempt to pull her from the melancholy of remembering. The opposite: I let her sink into it, trying to gauge, from the shadows of her eyes, how far she had slipped into memory. And even though she was drawing further away in time, the Spider seemed closer to me, more

present, more real. She was silently spinning the wheel of the past, creating obscure, complex, and beautiful patterns that appeared to reopen the same wounds they depicted. Suddenly I felt like I was being swept along by her memory, her thoughts; they radiated outward, so intense that they seemed to burst from her physical shell and penetrate, ravish any nearby presence. I understood, after a few seconds spent beneath that heaviness (a chaotic and irresistible heaviness, invisible but palpable: the heaviness of a concentrated thought from which you're trying to glean a little meaning, perhaps some truth), I understood that I was a spectator to something I had previously believed must only ever be staged within oneself, relegated to the secret theater of the mind, reserved for mystical experiences, and only possible in a symbolist painting or a nightmare: *I was watching an introspection*. Another soul was inviting mine inside her, directing her gaze at her innermost depths, and preparing to judge herself without mercy. It was an autopsy where the coroner was also the corpse, and the sole witness to this vision, to this sensation that could have been described as beautiful or hideous, beautiful and hideous, was me.

"He's a ghost," said Siga D. suddenly, and in her voice I sensed the voices of all the Siga D.'s she had encountered in her memory. "You don't meet Elimane. He appears to you. He goes through you. He turns your bones to ice and burns your skin. A living illusion. I felt his breath on the back of my neck, his breath rising from among the dead."

I simply looked at the sleeping city, it was my turn, and as I contemplated Paris, it occurred to me that this evening seemed a lot like a fucking dream. I told myself I should be prepared to wake up at any moment on the busted couch in

the apartment I shared with Stanislas. That was more probable than standing here, on the balcony of a luxury hotel, in the company of a great novelist who had a copy of *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*.

“Here,” said Siga D.

She handed me the book. I suppressed a shudder.

“Read it, then come see me in Amsterdam. Take care of it. I don’t know why I’m offering you this gift, Diégane Latyr Faye. I barely know you, and yet I’m giving you what is undoubtedly the most precious thing I own. Perhaps we’re meant to share it. Our meeting was unusual, it came about through odd detours, but it led here: this book. Maybe it’s chance. Maybe it’s fate. But the two aren’t necessarily contradictory. Chance is merely a fate unknown to us, a fate written in invisible ink. Someone told me that once. She might not have been wrong. I think that us meeting is life revealing itself. And that’s exactly what you should always follow: life and its unpredictable paths. They all lead to the same place, the same destination for all of us, but to get there, they take routes that can be beautiful or terrible, paved with flowers or bones, night roads we often travel alone, but where we have the chance to put our souls to the test. And also . . . it’s so rare to meet someone to whom this book says something. Take care of it. I’ll wait for your visit to Amsterdam. Write me once you’ve decided, so I can get organized before you arrive. I’ll leave you my contact info on the inside cover. Like this. There. Take it.”

That’s when I told myself: You’re going to wake up now, when you touch the book. I held out my hand, ready to open my eyes and see the backdrop of my living room. But the scene continued: I was holding *The Labyrinth of*

Inhumanity. It had the sobriety of a different era: a white background on which appeared, from top to bottom, the author's name, the title, and the publisher (Gemini), framed by an anthracite-blue border. On the back, I read two sentences: *T.C. Elimane was born in the colony of Senegal. The Labyrinth of Inhumanity, his first book, is the first authentic masterpiece from a Negro from black Africa who confronts and honestly depicts the madness and beauty of his continent.*

I had the book in my hands. I had already dreamt of this moment and was expecting it to prompt something different; but nothing happened, and when I lifted my head, Siga D. was watching me.

"Go, go read. It'll take you a while. I envy you. You get to discover this book. But I feel sorry for you too."

She didn't hide the sad shadow that flickered in her eyes. I didn't ask her what she meant by that last comment and slid *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* into the back pocket of my jeans after a tentative thank-you. Siga D. said that she didn't know if I should be thanking her or cursing her. I retorted that perhaps she was being slightly overdramatic. She kissed me on the cheek and said, "You'll see."

And thus the fat fly emerged from the web. I came home to a thick silence that was nonetheless punctuated by belligerent, conquering breaths: Stanislas was snoring. He was a translator from Polish and had been working for several months on a new version of *Ferdynand*, his illustrious compatriot Witold Gombrowicz's masterpiece.

I went to my bedroom with what was left of a bottle and played some music on my phone, a personal selection of songs by Super Diamono, my favorite group. I felt the book in my pocket, took it out, studied it for a moment. I couldn't

claim that I hadn't believed in its existence: there had been nights when I'd belonged to the book, utterly and unabashedly, nights when I had recited the whole thing in one sitting without ever having read it; but there had also been many others when its existence was reduced to less than a myth: to its mere shadow, to a fragile hope. That goddamn labyrinth! Yet here it was: the object of obsessions that I'd dismissed as juvenile and forever dead was rising from the bloody ruins of my dreams.

Super Diamono was playing, and Omar Pène's voice of molten obsidian was sailing toward day on the calm nocturnal sea. In its wake slid the peaceful and glorious "Moudjé," a memento mori in the form of a unique gem, forged in the lava of twelve minutes of jazz. *Da ngay xalat ñun fu ñuy mujjé*, it said, remember our end, think about the great solitude, contemplate the promise of twilight, which will be held for everyone. A reminder as formidable as it was essential, as old as time, but whose dizzying gravity I felt like I was realizing for the first time in my life. And so it was after surrendering myself to this abyss opened by Diamono and Pène that I began to read *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*.

It was still dark although moody indigo was already spilling over the edge of the horizon. I read; the night perished without a cry; then I read again and the bottle emptied; I almost opened another one but then changed my mind, and continued to read while listening to Diamono songs, until every star had disappeared into the ray of light piercing through my window and every shadow and every wounded silence and Stanislas's snoring and the oldest song of lament on this sad earth and everything I thought I knew about Man had faded away; then, long after the sun had risen and my

playlist had ended (though the silence that follows Pène is a poetic testament to Pène), I fell asleep, prepared to discover in my slumber a delirious transfiguration of that night's events, to awaken in a world that would appear unaltered at first glance, but where everything, beneath the surface, beneath the skin of time, would be forever changed.

Those were my first steps, after my evening in the Spider's web, onto the circle of solitude along which glided *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* and T.C. Elimane.

PART TWO

Summer Diary

July 11, 2018

Diary: I'm only keeping you for one reason: to record the extent to which *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* has left me a poorer man. Great works impoverish us and must always impoverish us. They rid us of the superfluous. After reading them, we inevitably emerge *emptied*: enriched, but enriched through subtraction.

When I woke, around one p.m., I read the entire book again, sober, without the drugs, without Siga D.'s magnetic presence. The experience was just as shattering, and I remained in my room, destroyed, unable to move. Around four, my roommate came in to make sure I wasn't dead. I claimed a migraine to justify my lethargy. Stanislas, who knows what he's talking about (he has Polish blood), gave me a host of tips for recovering from a hangover. Even one caused by a book? What book? I handed him *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*. This is what you're reading right now? Yes. This is what's putting you in this state? Maybe. Because it's good or bad? Not waiting for my answer, he opened it at random. Two, three, four pages read. He stopped. I gave him a questioning look: Well? He said: It's got style. I wish I could keep reading but I have a political GA. I said: Are the

anarchists finally going to take power? He said: No, topple it. I said: And after? He answered: Give it away. I retorted: To who? He asserted: The people. I asked: Who are the people?

The translator left without telling me who the people were. Then I read the book again, to the point of exhaustion. But the book itself is inexhaustible; it's gauging me, gleaming like a skull in a cemetery night. *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* ends with a promise: something to follow, something that I might never read.

I'd simply need to call Siga D. to find out the whole story. But I won't take the easy route just yet. The book will show its true colors. I can still see the Spider-Mother's sad look when she gave me the novel. I can still hear her words: I envy you but I feel sorry for you too. I envy you means you will descend a staircase whose steps sink into the deepest regions of your humanity. I feel sorry for you means when the secret nears, the staircase will be lost in shadow and you will be alone, stripped of the desire to go back up, because the book will have shown you the vanity of the surface, and incapable of going down because the night will have buried the steps leading to revelation.

I closed the book, then I began writing in you, Diary.

July 12

This morning, routine visit to the Senegalese consulate, the academic scholarship office, to renew mine. It's good until next July. After that expiration date, I'll have to figure something out: find a real job, or resume and complete my dissertation, or live on the street, or become the lover of some rich bougie old lady who adores the mysteries of Africa and will support me on their behalf, or write a book about personal regression disguised as a handbook for personal development. Or drop dead. Until then, long live the charitable Republic of France, which provides for all the necessities of my survival!

Next, I went to the library to take a look at noteworthy publications from 1938. I found an exceptional literary, poetic, and philosophical French cohort: Bernanos, Alain, Sartre, Nizan, Gracq, Giono, Aymé, Troyat, Ève Curie, Saint-Exupéry, Caillois, Valéry... Nothing less. But not a ghost of a T.C. Elimane or a *Labyrinth of Inhumanity*.

Back home, I ran into Stanislas and couldn't help bringing up the book again. He asked me what it was about. I wasn't expecting the question, which incidentally I hate. I thought for a second, then, since I had to answer, I said something

grandiose, sentences rife with capitalized words, something like: It's the story of a man, a bloodthirsty King; this King is seeking Power and is prepared to commit absolute Evil to obtain it, but he discovers that even the paths of absolute Evil lead him back to Humanity.

After my lyrical peroration, the translator looked at me for a minute, then said: That doesn't mean anything. I'm going to give you some advice: never attempt to say what a great book is about. Or, if you do, the only possible response is "nothing." A great book is only ever about nothing, and yet, everything is there. Don't ever fall into the trap of wanting to say what a book that you think is great is about. It's a trap set for you by the general consensus. People want a book to necessarily be about something. The truth, Diégane, is that only a mediocre or bad or ordinary book is about something. A great book has no subject and isn't about anything, it only tries to say or discover something, but that only is already everything, and that something is also already everything.