

The garden near the sea

Towards the end of the summer I had got into the habit of taking a walk, at about eight in the evening, round the large bay that runs along the southern edge of the town.

During my walks I had noticed the leaves of what seemed to be banana-trees, poking out above the bush that ran along the hillside beside the road. At first I thought they were wild bananas or even pandanus, whose leaves at a distance resemble the very tall banana-trees often found in gardens that have been abandoned.

Apart from the banana leaves that had first attracted my attention, I could clearly make out the ends of poles intended to support the yam vines as the edible tuber grew long and fat underground, away from prying eyes and the many dangers that threaten any existence on the surface.

Every fifty metres or so an informed eye might discern a small opening in the bushes, heading into a pathway barely wide enough for a man; the one I particularly noticed gave me the impression that it had been deliberately concealed. I imagined that all these pathways led to clearings. Small clearings about twenty metres by twenty at most, judging from the gaps in the tree-tops, which I could see from the road. What farmer or gardener would like to have every stranger who felt like a walk or wanted to commune with nature, take their track for a running or walking trail. Hence I understood exactly what had prompted these people to try and hide the tracks and the gardens from the gaze of passers-by.

Sometimes it was several days between walks but as soon as I approached a track again, I would be seized by the desire to follow it, to plunge into the bushes and emerge into a kind of void. I resisted, however, telling myself that I had no right.

And yet something told me that I didn't need an excuse to cross the road and see what they were doing; it was sufficient that I should want to go and enjoy being there, as I knew I would. I had already on numerous occasions spent long hours in a Kanak garden and its very distinctive layout, and I had always felt at peace there. The simple fact of wanting to was enough to justify my being there. On the other hand, I was afraid that the owner might come and find me there, and for several weeks that was enough to prevent me realizing my desire. But desire and love are more powerful than fear, and it was precisely these two marvellous impulses that were urging me on. And so one evening I left the house knowing that I was going to follow the first track that I came upon.

After walking for half an hour, I plunged straight into a kind of natural tunnel hiding the entrance to a track.

On this first occasion, I didn't stay very long. When I reached the edge of the garden, which to my surprise was situated much further from the road than I expected, I stopped still for a moment to take it in. I looked quickly around, without letting my gaze linger on any particular spot or plant. I think that this first encounter was above all marked by fear: the fear of being caught, certainly, but equally a fear of the spot itself, of its magic.

I remained like this for perhaps twenty minutes then, without a second's hesitation, without even a final glance around the clearing, I rose, turned my back upon the banana-trees and the sugar canes and walked briskly back along the track to the entrance. Thirty minutes later I was home.

In these last days of summer, there was a severe heat wave. During the day the thermometer rose above 30 degrees. Fortunately, in the evening, it inevitably rained.

Each time I reached the edge of the clearing, I was soaked, but there was no question of my making a fire to dry myself. Not that the spot was unsuitable, on the contrary; but I was afraid that the remains of the fire might betray my presence to the owner, who came to the garden daily. I knew that because on each of my visits I noticed slight changes.

On one occasion there were a few extra stakes stuck into the mound of earth prepared for the yams; on another, it was a few stalks of sugar cane that had been cut, or a heap of banana leaves that had been gathered up and placed at the foot of the tree.

I'm not sure how, but after four of these visits, I was persuaded that the person who came and worked there for a few hours each day, was a woman. And clearly an older woman.

I wanted to keep the garden free of any human presence except my own. And yet when I was there I behaved like a stranger; I was in it and, at the same time, suspended above it; I had no part in the creation or the organisation of this space.

A Kanak garden is a productive space whose *raison d'être* is first and foremost economic. This one no doubt provided extra food for a Melanesian family living in the town on a low salary, or maybe none at all,

The town is littered with these gardens. Every piece of hillside is dotted with squares in which grow bananas, yams, taro, potatoes, sugar cane and sometimes even corn and clumps of lemon balm.

This one near the sea was no exception

Sometimes I would close my eyes and listen to the myriad sounds of this garden. With practice I was able to identify them, to say what caused them and where they were located in the space around me. Then I would allow my mind to wander, to leave the garden and rejoin the coast where the road would lead me home, or to places where I had lived either recently or long before. Or else I would try to empty my mind; the spot was ideal for that and I had to be careful not to fall asleep. Whatever I did, the hours spent in this place always generously bestowed upon me a feeling at peace and well-being, and I would leave, my heart brimming with a feeling of beauty and harmony.

One night – it must have been the seventh or eighth that I spent there, as I was sheltering from drizzling rain, under a clump of sugar cane, I heard someone coming along the path. I retreated, leaving my shelter in order to hide in the bushes outside the garden. In a few seconds I saw a woman emerge from the path.

gathered up a few pieces of dead wood from nearby, and right there, two or three steps away from me, between two large stones, with surprising ease, she lit a fire in the rain.

a fire big enough to dry her hands and, more particularly, big enough to give off a pleasant, subtle, indefinable odour of soil, leaves and wood, that blended with the smells from the nearby sea. She remained sitting there for some thirty minutes, moving only to feed her fire. Then, when it died down, she left again as quietly as she had come. I waited ten minutes or so, then I came out of my hiding-place and left the garden.

The next day was not raining. I recalled the previous night and the fire near the bunch of sugar cane.

The ashes still lay in a pile between the two large stones,

This time,

I couldn't make up my mind where to sit.

I turned around, looking for a spot but, this time, nothing; the garden eluded me, it no longer spoke to me, I no longer understood it. I knew then I should leave. As I crossed the clearing, I passed by the remains of the fire. Suddenly it seemed clear that the best place to sit was near the ashes. And so I sat down on one of the stones. Slowly the feeling of calm returned again.

I felt good, at peace with myself,

And I silently thanked the old Melanesian woman who unwittingly provided me with such a feeling of well-being. I heard a sound behind me and turned around; there she was, watching me. She stepped forward.

-- Don't move, I'm going to sit beside you to rebuild the fire.

-- You always feel better in a garden when there is a fire. Even if it is small and not very strong, it can still be useful. When the children come with me, they love to cook pieces of baby yam in the ashes. This evening, it's not good for cooking; it was the same the other evening, too.

-- You knew that I was there the other evening, didn't you. You lit it for me?

-- I actually made the fire for you, she said, but I have the impression that you didn't understand.

True, I had never imagined that the flames, the heat and the smell were different ways of inviting me to come out from the bushes and join her in the warmth,

We were sitting opposite one another, on either side of the fire.

I broke the silence, absent-mindedly stirring the embers with a piece of wood as I spoke.

-- I didn't want to disturb or remove anything. It was just that this spot attracted my attention; I saw the leaves and the poles from the road.

When I am here at night, I feel good. I forget everything; it is like being in another world, close to the sky and to nature. As if I was with nature, as if I was a part of it.

What I said must have seemed disjointed and fairly incomprehensible to her; it was a combined explanation and embarrassed description of what I felt;

That's all right, she said, it's quite okay. If you feel good here, then you did the right thing coming.

Here, you know, the soil is not very good and things don't grow very well. I have other gardens further away, on the other side of the hill. Here it is just like this because I enjoy this spot, I really like being near the sea. So it's a bit like you: I do it to sit and dream. I arrive, I do a bit of clearing, then I tidy up, I burn a few things, I plant and transplant and then I sit down and relax. I don't think about a thing, I just look, or I think about my children and my ancestors.

She continued talking like that for a long, long while, in her own words, her own sentences. I knew that she was talking to me about the harmony of her garden, which was like the harmony that should exist in our lives; that there is an exchange between the two, one harmony reflecting the other and in return helping it to be even more harmonious and beautiful. As she spoke there were long periods of silence that I occasionally punctuated with a brief word or two. Then she would begin talking again, and say things about nature, about her own life and the lives of others; about the way to plant some plant or other, the same way that we should do everything here or anywhere. She told me when she had planted her yams and with whom she had done it, and why this patch was her favourite, even though

in fact it wasn't good for much. She talked for a long, long time, and I talked with her, answering her, oblivious to the passage of time, borne along by the sounds of the not far away waves and the subtle smell of the garden.

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Translated by Brian Mc Kay