

---

*"Riders on the earth together,  
brothers in that bright loveliness in  
the eternal cold...."*

On Christmas Eve, 1968, American astronauts had sent back man's first televised view of the Earth from the Moon, inspiring poet Archibald MacLeish to write the words that would equally have described the island of Mauritius. Small, finite, fragile, its airs and climates, oceans and waters, the great swirls of white thin atmosphere on its bright blue surfaces conferring on the planet an inescapable unity.

An island fisherman once told Mark Twain, "Mauritius was made first and then heaven; and heaven was copied after it." Tiny (38 miles long, 29 miles wide) and remote (1,200 miles out in the Indian Ocean from the southern coast of eastern Africa), it is one of a scattered group of islands known as the Mascarenes. Justly celebrated for its waterfalls, shooting stars, and frequent rainbows, there is an eerie spacelessness and timelessness about the place, with its fog and mists swirling slowly about green volcanic mountains. Charles Darwin, another visitor, noted in his *Beagle* diary that "masses of white clouds were collected around these pinnacles, as if merely for the sake of pleasing a stranger's eye," and Baudelaire wrote of Mauritius in *Parfum Exotique*:

*Guidé par ton odeur vers de  
charmants climats,  
Je vois un port rempli de voiles et de  
mâts  
Encore tout fatigués par la vague  
marine,  
Pendant que le parfum des verts  
tamariniers*

*Qui circule dans l'air et m'enfle la  
narine,  
Se mêle dans mon ame aux chants  
des mariniers.*

By an accident of history Mauritius' 950,000 inhabitants include Indians, Chinese, Africans, Arabs, and Europeans, all the major races and religions of humankind. As Egypt's Nile seems to symbolize human history, Mauritius is the world in caricature. It has the same gaps of money, race, power, and ideology that divide the planet itself and its hopes of survival are rooted in the same need to curb births, reshape the economic processes, and remedy the grosser inequalities.

Like the earth, it is not making too bad a job of it.

The rich, who are almost all white, have their golf, theater, cars, upland chateaus, and coastal beachhouses, read *Le Monde* and *The Economist*, buy their clothes, books, and art in London or Paris, and have every modern luxury. The poor—black, brown, or yellow—exist often at bare subsistence and, in their small stone or wooden huts, maintain Indian, Chinese, or African cultures. Yet all the island's people share the same TV, the same network of roads and communications, the same schools, the same jet airport and the economic interdependence that has made the entire earth such an intimate and vulnerable place to live.

How did this happen, so far away from anywhere?

Until the Age of Discovery, Mauritius was unpeopled. It was so cut off that its ecosystem developed separately. Unique species of birds,

insects, and reptiles evolved here, including the now-extinct dodo, that plump, round-bottomed bird with twisted beak who danced the quadrille with Alice.

It was not until the development—with the muscles of African slaves—of sugar plantations in the Caribbean that Europeans settled Mauritius. The Dutch and Portuguese came first but were driven away by rats, unintended fellow immigrants on their ships which, unchecked by natural enemies, fast multiplied. Then came the French—who brought mongooses. After 1789, when many nobles fled from Paris to the island, then called Ile de France, the population there declared it an independent colony of about 10,000 Frenchmen and 30,000 African slaves. The British seized it as a crown colony in the early nineteenth century. They renamed it Mauritius, ruled it, and demanded a share of the sugar profits, but they never settled it. They left it to the French and their black slaves to transform the rocky plateau into great sugar plantations, which, despite rats, fires, hurricanes, epidemics of smallpox, cholera, influenza, bubonic plague, enteritis, and dysentery, somehow prospered.

Slavery was abolished in 1808 in all the British colonies. The freed slaves, now mostly Creoles (*criollos*, colony-born) of mixed African and French blood, deserted the cane fields forever, creating fishing villages along the coast or working as artisans or dockers. The French were forced to import indentured Hindu and Muslim workers from India. By 1860 the population reached 160,000 and Chinese and

Arab traders swarmed in to cater to its needs.

After World War I, as sugar prices soared, the French plantation owners grew very rich and built fabulous estates with deer parks and high bamboo hedges in the upper reaches of the island. The British built roads, schools, hospitals, water and sanitation systems, and, with DDT, eradicated malaria, the main cause of death. As the mortality rate fell, the population rose from 420,000 in 1944 to 800,000 a decade ago. It was projected to reach a "catastrophic" two million by 1982.

Britain hastily granted Mauritius independence in 1968—setting off riots because few wanted it. A Hindu doctor who had lived 14 years in London and had attacked "British imperialism," Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, was knighted by Queen Elizabeth and became the island's first prime minister. The Indian cane workers now had 52 percent of the vote, an irony in a society to which the French had brought their language, culture, and miscegenation and the British their ideas of liberal government, racial prejudice, and the color bar.

Mauritius became the United Nations' fifth smallest member. Its strategic location in the Indian Ocean was noted in Moscow and Washington and even the Chinese, Libyans, and Egyptians opened embassies (creating an air of intrigue that makes Port Louis, the harbor and only town of any size, a locale in search of a Graham Greene novel).

In the late 1960s the World Bank described Mauritius as perhaps "facing the first true Malthusian breakdown." It then numbered 420,000 Hindus (who controlled its politics), 10,000 white Europeans (who controlled its economy), and 134,000 Muslims, 25,000 Chinese, and 230,000 Creoles of French-African descent. Aside from 70,000 jobs in the cane fields, there was little employment outside fishing.

In Washington about ten years ago when I asked the World Bank's newly created population division where to go to learn something about the world population problem, I was told Mauritius. I had never heard of it, but I went and it was the right place.

In Grand Gaube—the island's largest fishing community, with about 500 fishermen—near Cap Malheureux, the old men spoke of coming starvation and the Apocalypse and the young of revolution. A new Movement Militant Mauricien (MMM), led by Paul Beranger, a young white of French descent who had taken part in the 1968 Paris riots, was calling for violence to "sweep all the capitalists aside," and some of the rich were moving to South Africa.

In his chateau atop the plateau, a proud aristocrat of French noble ancestry spoke of dispensing charity to the poor. "Five years ago there was a gulf between us," he said. "I hated the blacks and they hated me. But when we came down from our castles into the streets we found they were just like us. Better than us in some respects." His blonde wife, pouring tea, said sadly, "My children are strange; they do not want to grow up." Her husband observed that if it came to it, the whites could muster only a small strike force.

In a Port Louis slum a brown-skinned revolutionary told me, "Now there is talk of rising up and killing all the whites. But our men say, 'The moment is not yet.' We will revenge years of slavery by the white capitalists and wipe out this corrupt government which betrays the people. I know it will destroy the island and I do not wish it but when the night comes, I will join."

I lived for five months in Grand Gaube. Each morning five of us, three young Creole fishermen—Octave, then 25, Karl, 19, and Geroge, 17—and my Hindu interpreter, Prem, sailed into the lagoon to dive for octopus and spear fish. Today Octave is married, has two children, has moved to another village down the coast, and no longer fishes, able now to work as a mason. No longer swimming underwater often against strong currents for three or four hours each day, Octave has grown quite fat. George has moved away and Prem lives in London, studying criminal law. Karl, now 29, alone has not changed, either physically or in his way and view of life. He still sets forth each morning to dive for octopus. I go with him, repeating but not recapturing the past.

The faces of Port Louis still tell the island's history: the descendants of

Dutch explorers; exiles from Versailles; bourgeois French colonists; prim English civil servants; bearded Arab traders; paunchy Chinese hoteliers; the great-grandchildren of slaves from Abyssinia, Mozambique, and Zanzibar and indentured cane workers from Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta; and all the human flotsam washed up with the driftwood from the seven seas. Above the port still rise the sooty ramparts of an English fortress; there is a staid Anglican cathedral and a statue of Queen Victoria, glaring stonily from her pedestal in front of the old Government House at coolies unloading cargo in the harbor. The back streets are narrow and twisting; along the lanes, the forbidden mosques and tottering houses of the Muslim medina cling to the hills like fungus; the Evil Eye is still potent; and a hundred taboos and incantations restrict the course of daily life. In front of a cheap cinema, curly-haired Arabs in skull caps smoke hashish. In a Chinese street, a no-man's land of pagodas, Mao posters, and watchful neutrality, merchants who will sell anything look at one with cold dead eyes. Near the harbor the African dock workers' quarter throbs with the sound of jazz, the beat of *sega* drums, laughter, oaths and curses.

I returned to this world-in-miniature after more than 10 years traveling the world, hopeful and encouraged by the declines in fertility and rises in productivity evident almost everywhere in the rural villages. Mauritius, a microcosm (of sorts) of the bigger reality, still reflects this world. Its rate of natural annual increase has fallen from 3 percent to 1.6 percent, its crude birthrate from 49 per 1,000 to 23 per 1,000. The current projection is that, far from reaching the two million predicted in 1969 for 1982, it will pass the one million mark only in 1987. Contraception, mostly "the pill," has won wide acceptance.

The island has been made another tax-free Hong Kong, luring foreign capital with tax concessions. Imported wool, for example, has enabled tropical Mauritius to become the world's eighth largest sweater manufacturer, though absenteeism, rising wages, and a high turnover of employees have blighted a promising electronics industry. Tourism is rapidly developing; luxury

hotels have sprung up all along the coast and air bookings in and out have to be made well in advance. Most tourists still come from France, the nearby French island of Reunion (which has no beaches), and South Africa, but as global travel increases the still largely untouched attractions of Mauritius should draw more and more Europeans, Japanese, and Americans.

A sugar boom in 1973-74, when record crops happily coincided with record world prices, fueled the entire island economy. While the worldwide recession of the late seventies has affected Mauritius, too, new houses everywhere, heavy traffic on the roads (the island has banned further car imports), and a generally voiced feeling of well-being are a stark contrast to conditions a decade ago.

Politically, Beranger's MMM has transformed itself from a group of hot-eyed young revolutionaries into a "labor party" which now controls the ports, buses, and many sugar plantation unions. In the last general election (1976), the MMM got the most votes of any party. There is speculation, if it continues to win over the poor, it could gain control of the government in 1981, with support of most Creoles, Muslims, and the younger Hindus.

Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, about 80, still leads the postindependence coalition of Hindu cane workers and white plantation owners that has held Mauritius together for over a decade. Yet even within Ramgoolam's own Labor Party there are stirrings of rebellion, and such a revolt could bring in the MMM. The big question is whether the coalition can survive and, if it falls, would an MMM government try to nationalize the sugar estates, set up state trading, and establish a socialistic regime on the Madagascar or Tanzania model?

For the Franco-Mauritians—who keep foreign bank accounts and apartments in London or Paris just in case—much is at stake. For the Hindu cane workers and Creole fishermen, it would matter much less. But even Karl is better off these days: he gets \$1.80 a kilo for his octopus, compared to 20 cents a decade ago, an improvement, even after considering inflation.

It is not a happy ending—but it is unimaginably happier than anyone could have expected 10 years ago. It is not really even an ending. For life is a matter of time rather than space; it is not position, it is change; it is not quantity as much as quality. It is, as French philosopher Henri Bergson said, not mere redistribution of matter and motion; it is persistent and fluid creation. Share a moment of the flow of time—a morning's journey on New Year's Eve 1969 into the lagoon near Cap Malheureux, the Cape of Unhappiness. The fishermen were very young and their island was beautiful and vulnerable, like a sea bird resting on the waves.

\* \* \* \* \*

Always, when the day began, Octave rose from his bed and went to the open door of his family's thatched hut to look at the sky. This morning the air was fresh and cool, swept by a slight southeasterly trade wind, perhaps moving up from Antarctica. The village was already stirring even though only the sky showed the approach of dawn. Some of the pirogues in the cove were already heading out to the reef and Octave could hear the dip and push of the oars. Soon he was making his way, half-asleep, through the whispering casuarina trees, carrying a mast, furled canvas sail, and his foot-fins, snorkle, and mask. An old man, his uncle Robert, came up the path from the cove: he fished alone at night with bamboo cages and was coming home.

"*Mofine, mofine,*" the old man complained. "Bad luck, bad luck." He had only three pounds of fish to show for the night's work. "*Ena trop boucoup pechere, zotla rode poisson partout—et poisson misere,*" he said in the patois of the Creoles. "Too many fishermen now, they hunt fish everywhere in the lagoon—the catch is miserable. It makes for unhappiness—bad luck."

"Don't say *mofine*, Octave said almost harshly. "Don't speak of bad luck, my uncle. It is the will of God." [Robert, now almost blind, no longer fishes but lives comfortably on a pension and what his children provide him. He and his wife, Ada, who used to cook for me—my hut was just next door—served me iced beer this visit in a house so immaculate I

told Ada, who was pleased, one could eat off the floor.]

A half-mile inland, where the Indian cane workers lived, Prem, then a Hindu student lacking money to finish his studies, also awoke and hurried to gather his diving gear to meet Octave at the cove. Prem's home was a tin-roofed shanty of cheap lumber. Prem alone—the only one of his father's children to graduate from high school—was allowed a small cubicle of his own; here he kept his Boy Scout uniform, his Junior Lifesaving Certificate, and his library: the works of Shakespeare, a New Testament, *Saint Joan, Tom Sawyer, Coral Island, The 39 Steps*, a Milton anthology, and Bernardin de St. Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, the most famous literary work about Mauritius.

Prem's mother was in the hospital; she had fainted while peddling fried cakes at the schoolyard; the doctor said she was suffering from severe malnutrition. Prem's father, a worn, sad-faced little Hindu, was near retirement age; after working in the fields all day he took his bicycle to the cove to peddle peanuts to the fishermen. One brother, Dutt, a tailor's apprentice who would not receive pay for five years while learning the trade, had already left the house.

The evening before there had been an argument. Dutt had declared, "In the very near future, there will be a revolution." Prem had seldom seen his father so angry. "Why do you put such ideas in your head? Only cowards do so!" Later Dutt told Prem, "He's an old man. He doesn't know anything. All his life he spent in the cane fields; that's all he knows."

Prem wondered what would become of Dutt. "*Manger, boire, donne jazz,*" Dutt would say, quoting a popular Creole saying. "Eat, drink—amuse yourself." Dutt read only cheap *romans d'amour* with titles like *Only You Know the Secret* and *You Lack the Dignity to be a Mother*. His taste in films ran to such as "Primitive London," which Dutt said was about "how hippies act, how prostitutes are being strangled, and how a doctor tried to save a woman in childbirth." Dutt went each night to watch the community television set, never missing

"Combat" and "Mission Impossible." He wanted to become a secret agent.

The family's future was bleak; in four more years his father would get only 20 rupees (\$4) a month as a pension from the sugar plantation. Prem, then 22, had spent two years writing 76 hospitals in London applying for training as an orderly, as many Mauritian youths did. "No vacancy...no vacancy..." the replies were always the same.

What would become of them, Prem asked himself—his family, the fishermen, the cane workers, the multitudes of children, everyone on the island? Andre, a wild-eyed Creole fisherman so fair he could be taken for a Frenchman, had told Prem the island's predicament fulfilled the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. "The Apocalypse is drawing near," Andre had said. "Day after day, we see the people becoming more evil. There is a place in the Book of Daniel where it says that, in the last days and the last times before the end of the world, God will fill all the people with intelligence. 'And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time.... And many of those who sleep in the dust shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt... the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but those who are wise shall understand....' Before and after Daniel's time this was not true, Prem, but we see it in this generation, this time we live in. We are living at the point of time, Prem."

Prem thought Andre a little mad; yet others too spoke of a coming apocalypse. Robert, Octave's uncle, warned of it and said starvation was ahead: once a fisherman might take home a catch worth five rupees, now he was lucky if it was worth two. Prem himself felt a sense of things reaching some kind of climax; many of his friends had joined the new Movement Militant Mauricien, which vowed to overthrow the government. But Prem wondered how it could do any better to help the poor. Violence would only ruin the island's sugar economy. Yet the same revolutionary sentiment was heard among the gangs of relief workers hired to repair roads and reduce unemployment; these men spoke of the

government leaders as "vampires, who suck the blood of the poor" and "Ali Baba and his forty thieves." Sometimes Prem would stop and listen to the laborers' talk:

"They must start factories."

"They pay us four rupees a day; do you think it is enough?"

"You yourself are guilty, having so many children."

"We must have a revolution."

"*Hein!* Some of you will say I must go and see my family, some will say I must go to fish; no one will come. Words mean nothing. You must have a fierce, strong wind. It takes a cyclone to blow down a banyan tree."

[*Today there are 30,000 industrial jobs; there were 5,000 in 1969; while there are still just under 15,000 relief workers (the same as 10 years ago), they are paid three times more or 18 rupees (\$3) a day.*]

Once Prem accompanied an American woman doctor who was studying birth control for the World Bank. Always the answers of the fishermen were the same:

"Are there no fish or are there too many fishermen?"

"The fish are few. We have no fish. Long ago God gave but now he doesn't."

"There are methods to limit the number of children. Do you approve of them?"

"*Non.* If God gives one, two, three, six, or even twenty, we must take."

"Do your children have good clothes and enough to eat?"

"*Non, misere, misere. Misere pe vini.* Misery is coming."

Prem watched and wondered, went home and anxiously wrote more letters to England.

[*His persistence was rewarded; in 1970 he received a job offer from a hospital in Nottingham. He borrowed air fare. Though he found an orderly's job harsh and met unanticipated racial prejudice in England, he stuck with it, eventually enabling Dutt and two other brothers to migrate to France. The four of them in time sent home enough money for*

*Prem's parents to build a comfortable and modern house, where they live with one remaining child, an 18-year-old daughter who hopes to study in England. After retiring, Prem's father was able to find work at another sugar plantation as a field foreman. The family has prospered.]*

The day of our journey, New Year's Eve 1969, George, who served as Octave's boatman, and Octave and Karl were already stowing their gear and ready to push off when Prem reached the cove. They were laughing and Prem thought to himself, "The Creoles take life as it comes." Octave, trained as a mason, had taken to fishing when there was no construction work to be found. Unable to earn much with nets, lines, or cages, he had taken up the more dangerous work of diving just inside the reef, where through open passes the coral fell away precipitously 2,000 fathoms to the ocean floor. Since sharks or barracuda sometimes rose from the black depths and entered the lagoon, only Grand Gaube's youngest and most adventurous fishermen hunted underwater. Indeed, some fishermen had never learned to swim, and each winter (in June or July) or when cyclones sometimes swept the island in February, a few fishermen always drowned. Their boats were too small, for one thing; and fishing techniques were almost as crude and rudimentary as when their ancestors, freed slaves, started to earn their meager living from the sea.

Mauritius, almost entirely ringed with coral reefs enclosing shallow lagoons of brilliant, clear, blue-green water, is the exposed tip of a volcanic colossus jutting up from the ocean floor. To the young fishermen, the underwater topography of their lagoon was as familiar as the island's craggy peaks, sugar plantations, forests, and scattered towns. Each pass through the reef had its own character: Barracuda Pass deserved its name; Kalodin was light and shallow but attracted sharks; Ramzan was all caves and tunnels where eels peered foully out of crevices; Basmaurice was a sunken coral island. Troualbert, named after London's Albert Hall, was the most mysterious: a deep break in the coral, shaped like a giant underwater amphitheater, green, misty, and silent, it turned dense blue-black where the



Karl with his catch.

stage would be as the rampart plunged to the depths beyond the reef.

Once the mast was stepped and the boom rigged, the old patched sail drew the breeze and the pirogue skimmed over the water, waves gently slapping at the bow. Karl began humming a tune; he was a small, muscular Creole, considered one of the toughest fighters in Grand Gaube. He sometimes got into fights when he drank too much rum and had once been jailed for two months for knifing another fisherman. Without nerves, strong, he was one of the village's ablest divers; he increased his earnings each afternoon and evening gambling over rummy.

"We'll be at the reef by sunrise," said Octave. Spotting two Hindu boys hunting crayfish near the shore, he shouted, "Hey, over there! What's that *couyonade*? Will you let that baby octopus go? You will have trouble!" He laughed and told the others, "Look, I scared them." The Hindu boys, alarmed, since it was illegal to kill a young octopus near the shore, scrambled out of the water. Karl and Octave laughed.

"These coolies from Malabar," Karl said, "we'll chase them away."

"That's not good," said Prem, standing up for his fellow Hindus. "They are frightened."

"Shut your *liki*," Karl, grinning, cursed him, using the Creole word for the female sex organ. "You have not the right to be angry. You are not a coolie from Malabar any more if you come fishing with us. You are a Creole."

"Look at the light coming," George, who was the youngest, called from the bow "Like silver." Their faces began to lose their grayish shine. Octave's face, half-hidden under a slouch hat with a torn brim he always wore fishing, seemed to darken with the growing light. "This is a good time of day," Octave said, relaxing as he were under sail. "Will I get fish with you, George? Will we catch 50 pounds today?"

"Non," muttered George drowsily.

"I must have 20 rupees for the New Year," Octave went on. "Now I have not one cent to buy my sweetheart a present." Octave was planning to marry a girl in the next village of Poudre d'Or (which he did two years later). But a church wedding was expensive since Creole custom decreed that the groom must hire a

hall and jazz band in Port Louis for *bals* that lasted all night.

Octave stood up, holding on to the mast, and began to sing:

*Dance with me, don't hold me tight.  
We will fall down and everybody will  
laugh....*

"There is a woman in Beau Bassin," began Karl, "who is called Belinda. She has a beautiful *liki*. I met her at the *bal* Saturday in Tamarin. I got into a fight. There's some bad ones in Tamarin. All because I boasted of Grand Gaube."

"Is she a little woman, this one you flirted with?"

Karl gave a laugh. "I made her younger sister also. At the dance itself, outside in the bushes. But I had no taste to sleep with them, these city girls from Beau Bassin. The older one got mad. I was a little drunk."

"If I had been with you, we could have passed along that road together."

"Her sister sat on my lap and I squeezed her breasts. I told her, 'I must sleep with you. What do you want? A necklace? A Coca-Cola? But I must have you.'"

Octave laughed. "If she was hot enough, who would have stopped her?" He called to George, who was holding the rudder, using the slang word for penis: "Hey, *gogot*, put the rudder to the outside." He looked around at the water. "Little Arnaud saw a barracuda around here." Octave began to sing again, in parody of Edith Piaf:

*Non rien de rien, je ne regrette rien....*

Karl went on. "When you go to Tamarin, you must have a firm friend with you. Those people are tough and proud."

"Like me," said Octave.

Karl quoted a village saying, "Four times truth, forty times lies." He admitted, "She was much older than me, that woman in Beau Bassin."

Octave gave a hoot. "Not much! Only forty-five! Two old ladies and Karl! Perhaps the two of them were whores!" He sang again:

*Little woman, don't hold me too tight.*

*I'm fragile; you'll make me afraid.*



Octave (left), George, and Karl (standing).

"Buffoon. *Liki* of your mama," retorted Karl. "That woman in Beau Bassin wrote me a letter. But to hell with her. There is not one taste to them, those women of Beau Bassin." Octave laughed and sang another chorus of "*Je ne regrette rien.*"

A redness was growing up out of the eastern horizon; smoke rose from a sugar factory; and green slopes mounted to the high plateau and beyond—the strange volcanic peaks, the Moka range, Corps de Garde and, pointing like a rocky finger to the sky, Pieter Both, named after a Dutch sailor who scaled the peak and then fell to his death centuries ago. Octave mopped his face with his shapeless hat. His shorts and tricot were rags, eaten away by salt; one could see the hard arm muscles through the holes. His face was weathered a deep brown, his eyes were a startling bright blue. Thick black curly hair framed a face that was both Gallic and African and yet

neither—humorous, savage, gentle, wise, the face of the Mauritian Creole. His feet bore small cuts from the coral as did Prem's, who asked what to put on his, festering from the hours spent each day in the salt water.

"Masturbate and rub the sperm in," advised Karl. "Rub it well. It's good medicine." He hooted. Octave began to sing "Island in the Sun":

*Oh mon Ile au soleil, Paradie entre terre ciel,  
Ou le flot le long du jour, change au sable fin chanson d'amour....*

"George was masturbating this morning," announced Karl. "I saw him waiting on the road and the headlights of a car came behind him and the light caught his hand. I saw something shining and I said, 'George, do you wear such a big ring?' 'Non,' says George, 'I don't wear any ring.' 'Then why is your finger glittering?' George wiped his hand on his shirt but I saw it in the

headlights of that car." Karl laughed. "The hell with you, George. The hell with you. You were masturbating."

George protested. "*Non, non*, I was not." He was embarrassed.

"Shut your *liki*, Karl!" Octave said. "George, spit!" George leaned over the side of the boat and tried to spit but nothing came; his mouth was dry. Octave and Karl hooted with laughter. "George, don't lie," Octave said, "you masturbated." To Prem's surprise, George lowered his head and mumbled, "Well, only *men* do it," causing the two older fishermen to laugh at him all the more. Octave roared out "Never on a Sunday":

*On voit des gris sous le ciel blue  
Un bateau, deux bateaux, trois bateaux  
S'ent vont chantant....*

"Oh, *Bon Dieu*, oh, *mo mama*, will I get fish with you today, George?" Octave teased. "Will I have to tell you everything, always?"

We were nearing the reef now (I was aboard the pirogue too but like Prem, who sat silently taking notes of the dialog which he would read back at home in the afternoon, I spoke little, absorbing the scenery) and saw outcroppings of niggerheads and meadows of seagrass and heard the watery roar of the sea as it beat against the reef masses of broken coral and sand. We passed over a deeper channel and entered shallower waters, drawing nearer to the crashing surf. As the sun came over the horizon, we sailed alongside a little fleet, five pirogues moving into the tossing waves; the fishermen aboard them were splashing their gaffs on the water's surface, hissing, and beating *batage* sticks against the wooden seats like jazz drummers to frighten the fish into their net, which flashed, beaded with light in the spray. Our own gray weathered canvas turned bright gold and one could feel the sudden warmth of the sun. The surf, crashing and spraying and foaming white, glittered.

"*Alle degage!*" the net fishermen's *patron* shouted and the two net boats began moving together, rowers straining their muscles. In the sterns of the *batage* boats, men with gaffs pushed fast, faster, and the

drums went out over the water, *bum bum te dum, bum bum te dum dum dum dum dum dum dum dum dum*. . . . A roar of shouts and oaths went up as all five pirogues bumped together; the drumming stopped and all hands rushed to haul the heavy dripping net in.

"Pull hard!"

"Swing around!"

"Draw it in faster!"

Karl shouted at them, "Change your wine, Francois! That Bordeaux is too strong for you!"

"Quickly, Pa, quickly! Pull it in."

"No, not that way, Herve. I'll kill you! You are good for nothing but whoring and stealing!"

"*Liki to mama*, barricade them!"

"Ah, *mo mama*, ah, *Bon Dieu*, ah, *mo mama!*"

Everyone loved to watch the exciting spectacle when the boats crashed together and the men pulled the great net in. Before striking out on his own, Octave had worked with the net fishermen and he still felt the thrill of maneuvering the boats and tossing the nets into the heavy surf to catch the shoals of fish. But there were many days of sharing a catch of 20 pounds between 15 or 16 men. Too little.

We watched until the boats moved apart and unfurled their sails again. In each pirogue a man stood in the stern with a gaff, turning his boat into the wind, silhouetted against the sunrise. As the gaffman lifted his long wooden staff and splashed the water, the boats seemed to grow wings of glittering golden spray. Octave pointed past them to where, beyond the reef, three large double-sailed craft had gone far out to sea. Each was 32 feet long, twice the size of the ordinary pirogues, which had to stay inside the lagoon. With motors and 10-man crews they could take the heavy waves of the open sea. Such a larger boat, called a *peniche*, brought home an abundant haul of fish every day. All three were owned by prosperous proprietors in Grand Gaube who hired men to do their fishing for them.

[Later, we tried to get help from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in hopes of

*acquiring larger boats and motors for Grand Gaube, where one-sixth of all Mauritian fishermen lived. The fishermen estimated that ten such boats, costing 20,000 rupees each, would be enough for Grand Gaube; with 1,200,000 rupees (\$240,000) you could buy enough bigger boats for all the fishermen on the island. The FAO was spending almost that much to investigate the possibilities of deep sea fishing, though this benefited only a few Port Louis commercial companies. We met with an American FAO expert several times, Prem acting as interpreter for a delegation of Grand Gaube fishermen, but it never came to anything. At the final session, the expert told Prem, "Please tell them there are just too many fishermen and there are not enough fish in the lagoon. I know they have problems but fishermen are poor the world over." After that meeting, we stopped in Grand Gaube to drink rum; and Octave, after downing several glasses, told me, "I am very unhappy when I look to the future. Who will help us? I'm saving every rupee now to get married but I don't know what will happen when winter comes. Sometimes the water is so cold, I want to cry out." He swayed from the liquor, then straightened up and said, "I do not live for money, Richard. I live for dignity." Today, 12 years later, no one has helped the fishermen get motors or bigger boats although some of the small, lagoon pirogues now have outboard Johnson motors in place of the old sails. The number of fishermen seems to have stabilized. While there are many more young divers than ever before, a good many fishermen like Octave have gone into other occupations. The FAO today talks much about spending less on reports and international conferences and devoting more of its budget to things like better boats and fishing nets. Grand Gaube has yet to benefit.]*

"Hey, Cokol!" shouted Karl at a passing boat. "Cokol is the premier buffoon of Grand Gaube. One day he told his wife he was ill. He took one of her birth control pills and was sick."

Octave joined in. "One time his wife bought a milk can. He used it for a *sega* drum and cracked the side."

"Once he spent ten rupees on rum and started to weep about it, the *liki* of his mother."

"Cokol stepped on a poison fish but when he took his foot away the fish was dead. You and I would have gone to sleep in the hospital."

The wind was dying. Octave complained, "The boat is as slow today as a *morpion* (crab louse) at the funeral of a *femme petain* (prostitute.) Oh, George, will you give me a heart attack? What a *gogot* you are, George. Rest a moment. The current itself is moving the boat." Soon we reached Barracuda Pass. The milky green water turned coal black and rough at the rampart edge. The boat tossed in the slow swells and choppy waves. Dark gray clouds were forming on the northern horizon. Octave stripped to his swimming trunks and dipped his fins into the water. "Wake up, Prem. Hand me my speargun. You kill me, George. Can you reach the bottom with the gaff here? If not, use the oar." He rubbed spit on the inside of his visor to prevent it from clouding. We donned our fins and masks and followed Octave and Karl into the water. Here all was silence, save the unfamiliar sound of one's own breathing. To the left, the coral reef descended sharply; perhaps 15 or 20 feet below there was a flat shelf, scattered with black rocks, open stretches of white sand and clumps of *posidonia*, a seaweed common to all oceans. Unlike the choppy surface of the pass, the sea below was calm, almost sluggish.

The underwater world of the lagoon then seemed to me (and still does) like a fantastic dream, a world of millions of years ago. One moves through a silent misty blue-green light, dappled with prisms of sun shafts, in a petrified landscape of coral, sand, and shoals of fish. There are silvered flat fish; tiny darting yellow and black fish; minute, poised fish of electric blue, fluttering red fish, slinking azure-and-green fish. That day I could see the reassuring blue fins of the others ahead and the luminescent air bubbles they left in their wake. Octave was suspended, floating on the surface, pausing a moment to look below, and then, holding his breath as his snorkle dipped below the water, he dove to the floor of the sandy shelf to investigate a few promising rocks thick with weed. He tensed as he spotted a spiny-backed Cordonier fish nibbling algae from a lump of coral. It must have weighed two pounds and, a fish

of the premier class, would fetch two rupees a pound.

Octave held his blue *Champion* harpoon gun before him and moved slowly toward the fish, flattening his body like an infantryman edging toward an enemy position. The harpoon—a short-range weapon of perhaps 10 to 12 feet of killing power but best for reef fishing—was tipped with a needle-sharp trident. Out of water, it was said, the harpoon could pierce the bodies of three men; I hovered just above him, waiting until he pulled the trigger to dive. When I heard the sharp ping as the harpoon was released, I dove, taking care to glance around to see if there was any big lurking shape. There was always a danger, once Octave or Karl began to bring in fish, that a shark or barracuda sweeping up from the depths might witness the kill, or the blood of the harpoon's wound might bring scavengers in from deep water. (Once, at Kalodin Pass, Octave swam up to me and gestured to look behind. Not ten feet away, I saw the wide, flattened, shovel-pointed head and white-tipped pectoral fins of a shark. It looked evil, obscene, and at least eight feet long, though everything looks larger in the water. Octave and I swam slowly to the boat, being careful not to make any darting movement or sudden splash. I was reluctant [and still am] to get too far from the boat after that.)

This time there was nothing menacing in sight, only a pink, curious parrot fish, watching without fear, as the Cordonier lashed its tail in reflex aggression. Prem, who had seen the kill, broke the surface to beckon George, who had drifted away, to bring the boat. I climbed aboard to rest but Prem and Octave swam off again. Prem afterward told me what happened: For a time they explored the caves and hiding places along the face of the rampart, then a dense mass of silvery *brette* fish, glinting blue and yellow in the shafts of sunlight, appeared ahead. Below, near the sandy greenish floor of the shelf, was another shoal of larger black fish. As they dove after them, the mass divided sharply leaving a wide channel, then closed behind them in a single black cloud. Prem and Octave swam softly forward over a carpet of sea grass, waving like wheat in a rainstorm. When they came to a patch of broken coral and a

large niggerhead, they stopped and floated, their eyes scanning the brilliant jungle. A blue-green form materialized through the far mist and came toward them, a beautiful *Cato Verte*. It circled closely beneath them as if displaying itself, and its dark blue eyes examined them closely. The large fish began nibbling on algae on the underside of a coral rock. Octave moved toward it, slowly raising his speargun. Just as he aimed and pulled the trigger the fish darted at a speck suspended in the water. Octave missed; he had to reload the gun hurriedly, paddling almost upright in the water. Not long after he had his harpoon restrung, the *Cato Verte* circled back once more, and Octave fired a second time, piercing the fish with his harpoon. Once he heard Octave fire, Prem looked around in preparation to dive. Here, the rampart fell very steeply toward the black depths and it was hard to see for any distance. Prem tensed and his head swiveled sharply to the side, as some secret sense warned him of danger. Now he saw a black shadow, probably attracted by the thrashing of the *Cato Verte*.

At first Prem thought it was a shark, but it was longer and narrower, its back as blue as a swordfish and its belly silver. Its giant erect tail slowly sliced through the water but otherwise it did not move. To Prem, it seemed majestic and dignified. But his skin tightened and he kept swimming toward Octave in a gentle rhythm. Then he saw that the big fish was moving on, ignoring them for other prey somewhere beyond in the misty, moving seagrass. Octave had seen the fish too and was moving carefully toward the boat, towing the *Cato Verte* at the full distance of the harpoon line. When the fish was safely in the boat, Octave told us excitedly, "Barracuda! There's a barracuda here." He told Prem to follow him back through the water, as Karl was still swimming some distance away. "Follow me, Prem; stay with me while I shoot a fish. Perhaps he'll go away." He told me to warn Karl and have George keep the boat as close as he could to them, then pulled his visor back on and swam off, Prem behind him. When Karl brought a fish back to the boat, I told him what happened. He followed Octave and Prem with his harpoon gun at the ready. Soon, on his third

dive, Octave speared a parrot fish then headed back toward the boat, with Prem a few yards behind. He saw the barracuda first. The big fish moved straight toward Octave, who pivoted until he was face to face with it, separated by only 20 feet of water. Slowly, Octave pushed the bleeding parrot fish off his spear and began to restring the harpoon. Prem stayed close to Octave's side, treading water as slowly as he could to stay in place. The barracuda seemed to drift forward until he was about six feet away. Octave kept his visor pointed right at it; he didn't look away or move a muscle. For some seconds, the three of them, the men and the fish, hung suspended in the water. Then Karl swam closer, his harpoon gun poised, pointed at the barracuda. Karl drifted close to him; with painful slowness, with Karl behind never turning his back, Octave and Prem swam the few yards back to the boat. They lifted themselves over the edge and kept the boat in place directly beside Karl until he too climbed aboard, having stayed in the water until the barracuda turned and swam off into the mist.

"Let's go," Octave said, trying to catch his breath. "We can't fish here with a barracuda around." He told George to step up the mast. Water dripped from his body and he sat hunched, trembling in delayed nervous reaction. He lit a cigarette and seemed to feel better instantly. The pinched, ashen look left his face. He noticed how dark the northern sky had become. "George, set sail," Octave said. "We'll go to Roche Blanch to hunt octopus closer to home. I don't like that sky. Maybe a storm is coming."

Prem and I looked nervous, causing Karl to laugh. "Thunder is good for octopus," he said. "They look out from their rocks. The most beautiful sea is today when it's rough." George stepped the mast, struggling under its weight. The tip of the sail dipped into the water.

"George, *to pena ena la vie?*" Octave exclaimed. "Have you no life in you?"

"George masturbates too much," joked Karl.

"George is very slack today. Oh, George, how can you make your living as a fisherman? And you want me to take you outside the reef?"



Flustered, George had forgotten before stepping the sail to pull up the rock which served as anchor. He had dropped it into the water during the excitement over the barracuda, trying to hold the boat close to the others. Now Karl and Octave hooted in amusement, and Karl pulled the big rock aboard, saying, "What kind of fisherman puts up the sail without pulling up anchor?"

With the boom rigged, the sail drew and the pirogue moved swiftly in the rising wind. Octave told us about the barracuda. "Six feet long, it was a dog barracuda, a *lichien tazar*. Its mouth was very big. When it sees you it follows you, moving its tail right and left. It came and looked at me right in my mask and opened its jaws twice. Now why did it do that?" Octave involuntarily shuddered. Then he laughed and imitated the fish snapping its jaws. "When you shoot a fish the blood gets scattered in the water. A barracuda comes. If you have a fish on your harpoon it can hurt you, the *liki*-of-its-mother beast. It was only six, seven feet away, opening and shutting its mouth, maybe only five feet from Karl. As you move toward it, it moves back. Very, very clever and treacherous. If you shoot a shark with a harpoon it will go away. A barracuda has a grudge. He will always try and fight you. A big head, the *liki* of its mother. When you get cut by the coral and blood is coming out, it will attack."

Karl asked what it was called in English and, when I said "barracuda," he repeated the word over and over, relishing the sound of each syllable. He puffed at his cigarette: "Ha!"

"George, you are a savage," Octave called. "You are a black comic. Roche Blanch is not outside the reef. We'll go there on a calm day. With these dark clouds spreading every way it could be dangerous."

The northern sky was a very deep blue and the wind seemed colder. "George, you take me for a buffoon if you say this is Roche Blanch, but put down the sail. At any time there are plenty of octopus in this place."

The water was very choppy now. Spray splashed into the boat; and when an unexpected wave burst over the side, drenching us, everyone laughed. "The octopuses come

in from outside the reef there," Octave explained, "not one by one but three or four hundred at once. *En bloc*. In a single mass that spills over the reef and then separates."

"Once I was net fishing with Bally," George said, "when an octopus came and grabbed me around the chest. I was wading on the reef. We were pulling in the net and the octopus came and jumped on me. I was afraid. Bally shouted to dive into the water and bite its head and it would let go. I was afraid but I did and it went."

"George, you are a *couyon*," laughed Karl. "George is the premier buffoon of Grand Gaube." Despite their teasing, both fishermen were fond of the boy and were teaching him the ways of the sea. [*Ten years later George, a strikingly handsome man with a face lined and aged beyond his years, a father with two children, invited me to his house for tea. He recalled our journey into the lagoon the day of the barracuda with great nostalgia.*]

We put on our gear and entered the water again. Here it was shallow and the floor of the lagoon was brilliant with open stretches of white sand and yellow seaweed, like a desert landscape, with rocks starred black with sea urchins, the only sign of life. The water was pale green, only six or seven feet deep. Soon Octave, Karl, and Prem were paddling steadily back and forth, holding spear-like *larfines* in their hands, swimming with their right arms. Their heads were down, searching the coral formations for a glimpse of octopus eyes.

They did not have long to wait. A small octopus under a flat rock, feeling the human shock waves, turned from a dark brown into a pale gray and squeezed itself into a dark crevice—too late. Karl's barbed *larfine* cut through the water, pinning the octopus to the coral. A cloud of brown ink spread through the water. The creature did not die, but stretched its suckered arms, reaching, searching. The tentacles clutched at his arm as Karl, holding the octopus away from his body, swam back to the boat. George took it from him, beat it with a stick and turned the creature inside out.

For almost an hour, as George held the boat steady, Octave, Karl, and

Prem kept bringing octopuses back to the pirogue. A viscid mess of them, in their pool of sepia, grew in the bottom of the hull. Now the whole northern sky above the white foam at the reef was dark purple, although it was still midmorning. George told me he felt afraid, though we could see a dozen or so other pirogues scattered around the lagoon. Finally Octave swam back to the boat and climbed in, shivering with cold and calling to Karl and Prem to come. "That should make ten kilos with the fish," he said. The morning's work would bring only \$2 or \$3. Octave stared at the black sky and the waves toward the reef, which were a strange deep green. "The darkness is spreading everywhere, *mo mama*. This eastern wind makes the sea agitated. So the hour demands we go home."

When Karl and Prem were back, both hunched over, dripping and shivering with cold, Octave told them, "When you find octopus, you have a taste for fishing. But I lose my taste for it today when the sky is so black. There could be heavy rains, terrible."

All around us the water had turned an intense pale green. The other boats were setting sail for home. "See the fishermen running every way," Octave said. "C'mon, George, we'll step up the mast; the pirogues are rushing about."

"They've all headed for the cove. We are the last," Prem said anxiously. There was more wind every minute. The sky was now midnight blue and the sea unnaturally bright green. Prem looked at the octopuses and then hastily away, perhaps remembering the legend they came from the flesh of drowned sailors.

George was openly afraid. "It's growing worse," he called as the sail caught the wind. Octave told us not to worry "It's nothing. The winter is harsher." Karl was unconcerned. "This weather is only good for playing rummy. You must experience a storm like this to be a real fisherman."

"Look! Look!" George pointed to the reef. The breakers had risen to a boiling wall of churning white foam. "The wind is bringing cyclone-like waves to the reef," said Octave. "Like smokel!" shouted George. Then the sail shipped in the wind as a

sudden gust hit us. The pirogue was moving hard for the shore now. It was as dark as dusk. All we could see was a flat treeline, most of the island hidden by the storm clouds. To the north there were flashes of lightning. The deep blue of the sky, as if it were overweighted, seemed to bend over the boat and the lurid green choppy water. Waves again broke over the side drenching us, but now no one laughed and even Octave looked afraid.

Then a large cold drop fell on my knee, another on my hand. I thought to put on my shirt, lying in a sodden mass at the bow, but at that moment there was a pelting across the water, then on the sail and the boat. The squall had hit us. Suddenly, with a fearful, deafening din, the sky smashed just above our heads. Everyone crouched and held his breath. A blinding bright light

*Octave sets speargun; Prem in foreground.*

seemed to burst all around us. Then the rain came down in a torrent, solid straight shafts of rain, blotting out the shore and the reef. For some minutes the rain pelted, settling in. Then the thunder stilled. The wet, sodden sail stopped whipping and went slack. The water lost its vivid green color, the waves subsided, and we could see Grand Gaube, not so far away now. Octave and George sat hunched deep in the hull, water trickling down their hair and faces. They pulled their wet tricots over their heads and knees, claspings their legs, as if they had decided to do nothing but sit still and wait out the rain. Karl and Prem sat on the edge of the stern, barechested and wet, in their swimming trunks. Beaten by the heavy rain, the sea became almost still, its surface flat.

Octave shook himself off. "Tomorrow it will be calm. Or maybe a cyclone is coming." He stood up and began to sing gustily!

*O, Capri! C'est fini...*

"The rain will last," said Karl.

"The rain will be here until evening," George said.

Karl shuddered with cold. "You must have a woman to get warm after this." He shouted at a passing boat, "Attention! La Mort! Beware! Death!" Then he too began to sing in a loud, hoarse voice, "My priest has raped me, so I yelled to my husband...."

Octave laughed. "Have you husband?"

"Go to hell. Octave is like a *gogot* in Paradise."

"Karl is like a *gogot* in torn pants. When he fights, many to go prison and must pay bail and some sleep in the hospital."

George scanned the shore. "By luck Benny the Fishmonger will still be there." Octave was still loudly singing: "Twist again, like we did last summer...." He held onto the mast and started to dance in the bow.



"Hey, Octave, you might get killed," George called.

"Little by little we are going to die," muttered Karl. "*Liki to mama*, I am a tired body."

The pirogue entered the cove and Octave began to sing a *sega*, beating out the rhythm with the tiller stick. Karl joined in, making a thundering racket:

*Happy New Year, Happy New Year,  
Grandpapa.  
Happy New Year, Happy New Year,  
Little Children.*

"*Hou, hou, ou ou, la bas, la bas, la bas!*" roared Karl, keeping to the fast *sega* beat. The two fishermen sang back and forth, shouting out their improvised words, until the songs turned into an uproarious cursing match—

Octave: Farewell, the sun forever,  
Farewell, my old friends.

Karl: *Mo mama*, give me a gun,  
And when I die don't weep.

Octave: Farewell, my island home,  
Farewell, the clouds and  
birds.

Karl: If you don't let me sing,  
Octave,  
You will have trouble.

Octave: You are lying;  
I'll hit you with a bottle.

Karl: You are dead;  
I'll break your *liki* and bury  
you.

Octave: *Gogot, liki to mama!*

The shore was very close now, and little boys, scampering naked in the rain and excited by the roaring songs, came running from the sand, splashed into the water, and swam toward us. Though trembling with cold, water dripping from faces and hair, none of us seemed to want the journey to end. Suddenly every second left seemed precious. It was as if we were all conscious of something important lived through together that morning and wished a wall would suddenly rise from the water and prevent us from going any further. Then we could have held the past, the glory of the morning's journey into the lagoon. Somehow we had come much closer to the truth of things: Mind, not matter; time, not space; action, not passivity; choice, not mechanism—the inner reality. And with it a prescience that we could not escape its flow—almost as if we could see ourselves as we would become: Octave, grown fat and frowzy; George, a solemn loner fishing by himself; Prem, colder, harder, in London forever.

*[Only Karl, by some trick of fate, and the lagoon itself would stay unchanged. Now, ten years later, Karl*

*and I sail out each day to dive with others, perhaps the adult versions of the swimming children, our journeys subdued, ritualistic, as if we are commemorating something past, something lost in the flow, as if past and present do not exist apart. (And Prem, writing between classes at London University: "Do the same trip over again and give my love to the sea").]*

The rain whipped down. Yet we wanted to stay as we were, rain and all, everyone taking deep breaths to join loudly, raucously, in the song:

*Happy New Year, Happy New Year,  
Grandpapa!  
Happy New Year, Happy New Year,  
Little Children!*

Octave leaned forward, breathless from shouting, his face wet and glistening with rain, his voice serious:

"You come fishing with me as long as you like, Prem. If you come with me in the water, you know, I am not afraid when I see something. I can shoot it and I can chase it. When you see a barracuda or a shark, don't go away. Stay beside me and we'll break his *liki*. When a friend is with you, you have the courage to dive."