

# ***Don't Call Me Captain***

***Lyonel Trouillot***

Excerpt translated by Hannah Embleton-Smith and Charlotte Coombe ©2019

*Do not call me Captain. Don't upset the poets; my sorrows have never had sea legs. And my only desire to travel was my desire to follow you. Do not call me Captain. I am an old tarantula, a little blue land crab. And tomorrow you will trample me and spit on my wounds. That's what living is. Stepping on other people's backs. Whatever the time. Tomorrow. Yesterday. We step on the backs of others. Sometimes we turn them over and step on their hearts. That's the way it is. Shit. Do not call me Captain. That's what it all comes back to. Intentions fucking everything up. One moment you're looking for the path, the next you fall into the mud covering it. Captain, what Captain! Captain of your muddy waters!*

Each time we met, I dreaded the moment when the man would unravel, his coarse hands cutting through the emptiness, the violence in his words returning something like strength to his voice. The first time he started shouting in the middle of the interview, or rather tried to shout while battling emphysema and rheumatism, I was frightened. He no longer saw me; he was gone to a place inhabited only by him, his face a mess of tears and drool, black water flowing with pleas and curses. He reminded me of Maxime having one of his outbursts. But there was a big difference between this old man and Maxime. One shouted at the dead in a deluge of language, never short of words—only the living to hear them. The other, for lack of words, had spent his childhood breaking and pulling apart the piles of toys given to him by his parents, his family and their friends, envying his little sister's dolls from a distance. I was

given so many. All of them white. Only Uncle Antoine gave me a black one that he found in an artisan shop. It came from the Iron Market, one of those places I didn't know existed. Aunt Marthe had wanted to have it disinfected. I don't know what it was about the doll that repelled her the most. Its colour? Its origins? But she nurtured a hatred towards it usually reserved for the evil. Maxime wasn't picky. Every doll was a wonder. A double he could play with. A sister to confide in. He spoke to them much more than he spoke to me. He liked the black doll as much as the white ones and took them all off to his room. I let him. In childhood it was like a pact between us. He'd give them back to me and I'd arrange them in order, from oldest to newest, when our cousins Jeffrey and Julie came over. Jeffrey only liked games that involved punching things. Julie thought she was the most beautiful of all the dolls and did not deal well with competition. It's the same even now. The way they see themselves hasn't changed with time. Some things never change. Including my cousins, I suppose. And Maxime spent early adolescence acting tough, which he never was. He'd copy Jeffrey, using nothing but a handful of swearwords so he could sound like his monosyllabic friends. Now, almost thirty, shut away in a bare room—his cell, he calls it—Maxime makes do with very short sentences: Yes / No / Leave me the fuck alone / Let me out, cutting short any attempt at conversation. Maxime's language is little more than lyricless music that alternates between crying and groaning. He's ripped up expensive paintings, shot a dog that was too loud, got a yard boy fired for not giving in to his tantrums... His outbursts and agitation could be so damaging, affecting the lives of those who had to be around him: his parents, his friends, the carers. But Captain's voice bothered no one. There was nothing threatening about a man stuck in his chair, shouting after dead shadows. Unless someone actually bothered to go and listen to him, what harm could he do with his repertoire of news stories from a different time and his old, worn skin, creased with anachronisms? Language is only harmful when it hits its target. He said so himself: *A word is not a bullet which, missing its target, goes and kills someone else instead. There's not a neighbour or bystander who would make the mistake of taking an insult to heart when it's meant for another. Any remark that doesn't hit its target turns into a boomerang: we only hurt ourselves by talking to people who aren't here.* When he said that, I wanted to reply: "Stop acting like a philosopher just because you're old. I know that. I've known that since I was a child. Whenever I wanted to get through to my mother or father, wanted my words to reach them, all I'd feel was empty from wasted energy, and ashamed for giving in to such a stupid hope." There were fifty years between us. He was two years older than Uncle Antoine. But—as he barked to the ghosts that he alone could see and call out to—you don't need to have been around the world, or been around forever, to bear pain alone with no friends or allies. No matter where you're from or how old you are, everyone has their *gai savoir*, their secret knowledge. Captain had preserved his in his house in Morne Dédé, a neighbourhood at the top of a hill which saw its glory days during the

dictatorship. A neighbourhood of enemies at a time when it was dangerous even to be alive. From his window he'd point out houses, or what remained of them. They had built new, poor quality ones, boxes joined at the top or body as if hurriedly grafted over the remains of the detached houses: a basic framework, an old wall, a window frame. This was the neighbourhood's physical state: an assault on ruins, a chaotic blast of mortar, corrugated iron, panels and PVC. Cities are palimpsests. That was the first conclusion I drew from my research. When Captain said "over there", I had trouble finding the old beneath the new. *Lieutenant Colonel Mercilus lived over there with his wife and three daughters—a marine officer. He was a gentle sort. One of those rare officers who didn't indulge in mistresses or the betting table. So loyal. So kind. One morning he was arrested by his subordinates, and his daughters were forced to marry dignitaries of the regime selected by the presidency. That's the way it was. One big, happy family, this country! Marriages! Divorces! Unions and inheritance! The boss had the power to do—and undo—everything. Five houses down from the Mercilus family were the two Pierre-Paul brothers, who were literature students. They were picked up one evening in a DKW and never seen again. They had a gift for theatre. One wanted to play Hamlet, the other preferred Othello. They spoke about everything: the art of staging, cardinal virtues, free love and the class struggle. One evening, a commando unit turned up. The leader grabbed the older brother by the collar and told him: "I'll fucking shove your cardinal virtues up your ass—Hamlet and Othello and all that crap." The younger brother didn't even have a chance to speak. Why speak when actions are enough? Or inaction. After that, the mother of the Pierre-Paul brothers was done with words. From that evening until her death she never so much as whispered another word. There weren't many people at her funeral. She died mute, orphaned by her sons. But political crimes are merely the most vulgar form of human violence and indifference. Even here on this very hill, I've seen so many murderous hands rummaging around in wounds they could have dressed. Or waving from a distance—more mocking than considerate—as they go on their way. I don't know which is worse: those who have killed, or those who leave others to die. Oh yes, my dear, everyone has a path made of debris, shame and lies.*

Morne Dédé. What was and what remained. What had changed. That was why I went there: to do my first placement as a future international correspondent. Investigate facts and dates. Follow a loose thread. Weaving and discontinuity, as the headteacher put it. That's what makes a good assignment. The course was my idea. Something I'd found on my own. Against the better judgment of my family and my former classmates at the French Lycée. And of Julie, my favourite cousin and best friend. Uncle Antoine was the only one who wasn't opposed to my choice. Uncle Antoine, whether by nature or habit, neither opposes nor commits to

anything. At least, that's what he lets people think. And Maxime doesn't count. Maxime lives in a world closed off to others. A distance learning course in journalism. A whim. In Montagne Noire, everyone has at least a year to fritter away after their final exams. Some are in such a rush to help protect the family estate that they walk straight into a management role at a company, factory or supermarket. Or they go into business studies, expecting quick returns. Others procrastinate, consider their options, flit between them, indulging impulses they take seriously for a day, a few weeks, maybe a few months, and abandon them if their mood shifts to something else. I belonged to the latter. I had time to explore things, to pick them up and drop them. No pressure to hurry into something permanent. I don't know why I chose that course, why it caught my attention at the time. I didn't think I had any particular talent for journalism and the only investigations that interested me took place in the crime novels I used to borrow from the school library. By the time I arrived at the Lycée, I was as tired of mysteries as I was of reading, and curiosity had never really been a family trait. But what Captain said was true. I can see him now, sitting in his room upstairs—the only furnished room in the house at the time. I can hear his hoarse voice: *When people have it all, they're allowed to make choices that don't last, they can do things "in the meantime" like a sort of training, a way of distracting themselves while they "give it time".* It's true. If people are rich they flutter around; they find ways of waiting without knowing what they're waiting for, or how long the wait will last. *When people have it all, there isn't the least hurry to make a choice, even less so to commit to a cause or path. They can spend their whole lives being indecisive. Believing that they're still fifteen when they're thirty. That they're still a pretty little thing at forty, not realising how their figure, once slender, now looks to other people. Features so scrawny it's as if, for lack of anything to do, the body had busied itself stripping away its flesh in search of eternal youth.* At the time, I was hurt by his jibes. I idealised slimness. Now I see how right he was, about bodies and many other things besides. Take my aunts and, soon, my mother: former beauties now sliding towards the end, faded and elegant. Bodies altered at every opportunity, refusing to age and yet ageing anyway, ageing so much they no longer fooled anyone except their owners when they looked in the mirror. The contradiction they embodied was proof of his keen eye. Especially when it came to Aunt Marthe who, one foot in the grave, sang her symphony of tomorrows, declaring: "God will give me time to discover who I am." This annoyed Uncle Antoine, who would break his silence briefly to recall some half-century old anecdote and show her that, my dear Marthe, you've been a fool ever since childhood, and that's probably why you never came out the other side.

*Who are you?* That was one of the first questions Captain asked before agreeing to take part in my research. *Who am I?* was the topic of the first assignment set by the teacher. Describe yourself. Because, he said, if we can't describe ourselves, how can we profess to

describe things that exist beyond the self? A false assertion. It's possible to understand everything about other people without knowing yourself at all. Who was I? Following in the footsteps of family tradition, a bit like Aunt Marthe, when I asked myself that question, no answer came. You were right, Captain. When you have it all, sometimes you don't know who you are, other than the things you have. Maybe at the time I was no more than what I owned. I could be tallied up, set out in a list. A rich family. Rich people's habits. Rich people's ideas and feelings. I had a little rich girl's car: a birthday present for my eighteenth, which my cousin Jeffrey said I should change because now it was two years old and nowhere near powerful enough. Rich boyfriends, mostly cousins and friends who I flirted with, danced with, almost slept with because, ever since I was a little girl, I'd done everything with them and didn't know anyone else. I had a small studio at Uncle Antoine's "ranch" where I could draw: a gift I only made use of every few months as a hobby. In our family, the "ranch" means two hectares overlooking the sea where there have never been more than three horses at any one time, and where Uncle Antoine and Agénor, his only employee, have barely managed to keep a rose garden and plot of sweet peppers alive. I was these things. A sum that could be totalled of my actions, my habits, my journeys. From Montagne Noire to the French Lycée. From the French Lycée to Montagne Noire. From Montagne Noire or the Lycée to the airport for a holiday, either with Julie or for a "school trip" with a bunch of friends from my year. From Montagne Noire to the ranch avoiding the city, just skimming it before getting on the main road. In that pause between exams and the future I didn't have any kind of routine. I just had time, which I passed going out with our group. Maybe that's why I was drawn to the course. To have a plan. A regular journey, a routine. For our final piece of work our teacher set us the task of reporting on a neighbourhood that was unknown to the trainee reporters, with a minimum of ten visits. Choose an aspect, a part of life from the neighbourhood and show how it's changed within a certain period, based on the account of someone who was there. Do two things: create a profile of the person and put a story together.

Where should I choose? I only knew "us". Outside our circle there was only a kind of hybrid matter or being, inexpressible. A formless spectre, somewhere between a hydra and heap of trash identified as "the others". I didn't even know the names of the neighbourhoods I didn't know. Now I think of it, it's not that I didn't know the neighbourhoods: they never existed. Things that exist have a name. With a name, even if you don't know what it is, you can imagine it. A name promises content, substance: a body or being, a place or thing. A name is like an entrance, an access card to someone or something you might come across one day, if only by accident, and which you would eventually give a shape, characteristics, flaws or qualities. Uncle Antoine had given me two names: a man's name—or, rather, a man's surname—and the name of a neighbourhood. An address. I was to say that I'd come on his behalf. Two names. Delivered with no further information or instruction, but with a half-

smile that was either ironic or kind, I couldn't tell. Now I know. I understand. A little. Whether it's to create a sense of mystery or because he doesn't care, Uncle Antoine never gives anything away. When he was twenty years old, he married one of his cousins. It lasted all of a week: they got through the ceremony, a dinner with no groom's speech, and the start of the honeymoon in a luxury hotel in South Florida. Then he settled up and came home early in the most discreet way you could imagine. Without coming up with some elaborate lie. He was going for a pack of cigarettes and some air, and he'd be back soon. Without confessing his feelings: he was wrong about the sincerity of his love, was sorry, had to leave to find peace with himself, didn't want to see his wife of a few days spend her whole life with a man who didn't love her, hated himself so much he wished he were dead, would always be sorry, would always hate himself for his actions, couldn't forgive himself, begged her to forgive him. Without scientific hypotheses, probabilities supported by examples: if we had children, what about consanguinity and its disastrous effects, look at our cousins, ourselves, our nephews. No, Uncle Antoine is not one to open up.

Two names: Morne Dédé and Captain. Before then, for me, Morne Dédé didn't exist, and neither did the other hills of the city. Now I know there are at least fourteen. A Tuf, Hôpital, Bel Air, La Source, Hercule... As Captain would say, when you're rich it doesn't take long to do your research. Gather your resources, get yourself together. Dedicate time to a search, a passion. Until then, the rest of the world had never been a passion of mine. Not even something you take a vague interest in while you gain some minimal knowledge, just enough to bring up in conversation. In my family, the rest of the world has no name.

[...]

The boy's smile—I'd learn his name later: Jameson—led me to the door of Captain's house. It looked abandoned. I hesitated. A voice told me to come in and come upstairs. The ground floor seemed uninhabited. A huge room. No furniture. Nothing but rolled up mats resting against the walls. The door at the back was open, leading to some other rooms. The layout was strange: an endless ground floor, a tiny first floor. The voice was coming from upstairs. It kept speaking but was no longer addressing me. *"When I'm nothing more than a ghost, I'll love you / love is not a ray that we catch as we pass / chamber music in the night / but a vagrant tenderness that falls with no going back / when I'm a ghost I'll love you / faded / captivated / loyal for all eternity."* An old man was sitting in an armchair reciting verse, his body thin but muscly. I'd hear them often, those verses. By our final meeting a few weeks later, I knew them by heart. And then I was the one reciting them, watching the man sitting voiceless in his armchair. Before we moved onto something else.

*Did Antoine send you? Does that old bastard still prefer his horses to humans? With a family like yours, you can hardly hold it against him. Those batty old women, and the little brother, Hans. They say he's the man who turns everything he touches to gold, which he keeps for himself. The greatest trader in the Chamber of Commerce. They say he controls all of it: the tax authority, the national audit office, customs duties, the media... This might be one of the last neighbourhoods where he doesn't own a single building or business. Don't get angry with me for saying that. My father was a bit like yours, before it was possible to make a living like that. In his intention, at least. He dreamed of being a businessman. He spent his whole life adding rooms to this house. To set up a factory. There never was any factory. Nothing but this bunch of rooms. Not everyone can be like your father; mine didn't get it. Back then, if you lived in Morne Dédé, you were lucky not to be one of the poorest. There was enough to eat. You had a surname. People called you monsieur. But you were kidding yourself if you didn't see that the factories were for Hans senior and Hans junior! Does your father know you're here? I expect he never came here because there's no money to be made. What could your father buy or sell here? The rubble? The older generations took their old, useless secrets to the grave and their descendants ran off to safer climes, taking their memories with them, along with the little savings they had. The newcomers didn't have the means to cultivate secrets, or think about saving. They just fornicate, smile, cry, shout, yell, fight, sleep, scrape together what they can and live on top of one another. Does your father still wear his helmet, like a coloniser? Are you sure he knows you're here in the ruins of Morne Dédé, with no driver and no bodyguard? A footballer lived here once... He had a deep voice that seemed to come from the depths of the earth; it made children run away. Over there, behind that hedge where you see that sort of street market and ravine hollowed out by the rains, that over there was our pitch. On a slant, and never standard size. It was always wonky: too big one day, too small the next. We brought in Diogenes to mark it out. He was a decorator, always with a bottle in his hand, who lost so many jobs he eventually decided to give up on the idea of regular work altogether. His good sense told him never to paint things as they were before. He always marked out different dimensions. But no one gave a shit. Not the referee, not the players, not the spectators: no one. Mind you, the referees were just as entertaining. Once, we were allowed to have a high ranking official from the militia come along. He wanted a match with no punches thrown: a sign that this was a peaceful country. He gave yellow cards to twenty-two players before kick-off. And a red at the first foul. Another referee had his mind elsewhere, up in the stands with the girls' legs, and he never blew the whistle at fouls. And as far as the pitch markings went, if someone complained, Diogenes would come back with something like, 'Massive or minuscule, things end up taking on whatever size they can—destinies and football pitches alike. Standard sizes are not a part of life. In reality, everything is always too big or too small, it comes too early or too late, swells or shrinks. And anyway, if*

*they were expecting standard size markings, they shouldn't have asked an alcoholic!' One evening, Diogenes lost the match and his spark went with it: slumped in the stands, his lifeless eyes fixed on the pitch he'd marked out over and over again in sizes of his choosing. The whole team went to the funeral dressed up to the nines. Even the ones who never had enough money to pay their subs for a uniform managed to find a black jacket and white shirt—slightly too large or small, like the pitch. But clean. They turned out in full. Even the reserves who had no chance of playing. 'Meteor', that was our team name. Don't ask me why. We never ran that fast. Some of us were out of breath after about ten metres and lagged behind for the rest of the match, hands on hips. But we liked the name. On Sundays at the cinema, our favourite thing to watch were the chases. When the hero caught the bad guys we were almost sad; we had a need for speed. Why am I telling you all this? Oh, yes. Does your father know you're here? This man I'm telling you about was left midfielder. We weren't at the top of the local league; we were just about average. There were neighbourhoods like yours, and then others further down the pecking order. When boys from one of the housing estates came to take us on, thinking they were better than us, he'd make for the right winger on their team before kick-off, slap him on the back and ask, "Hey, kid, does your dad know you're here?" That always worked. The kid would be shaking with fear the whole match and miss every open. One day, our friend had enough of terrorising the local champions. He became something of a crooner and went on to have a dazzling singing career. We all know where we start out, but not always where we'll end up. He died of a heart attack showboating to a crowd of old women in some Miami restaurant. He's dead. Diogenes is dead. Everyone is dead. The players. The reserves. And the cinema's closed. So, I'll ask you again: Does your father know you're here? And what have you come to dig up in my land of the dead?*