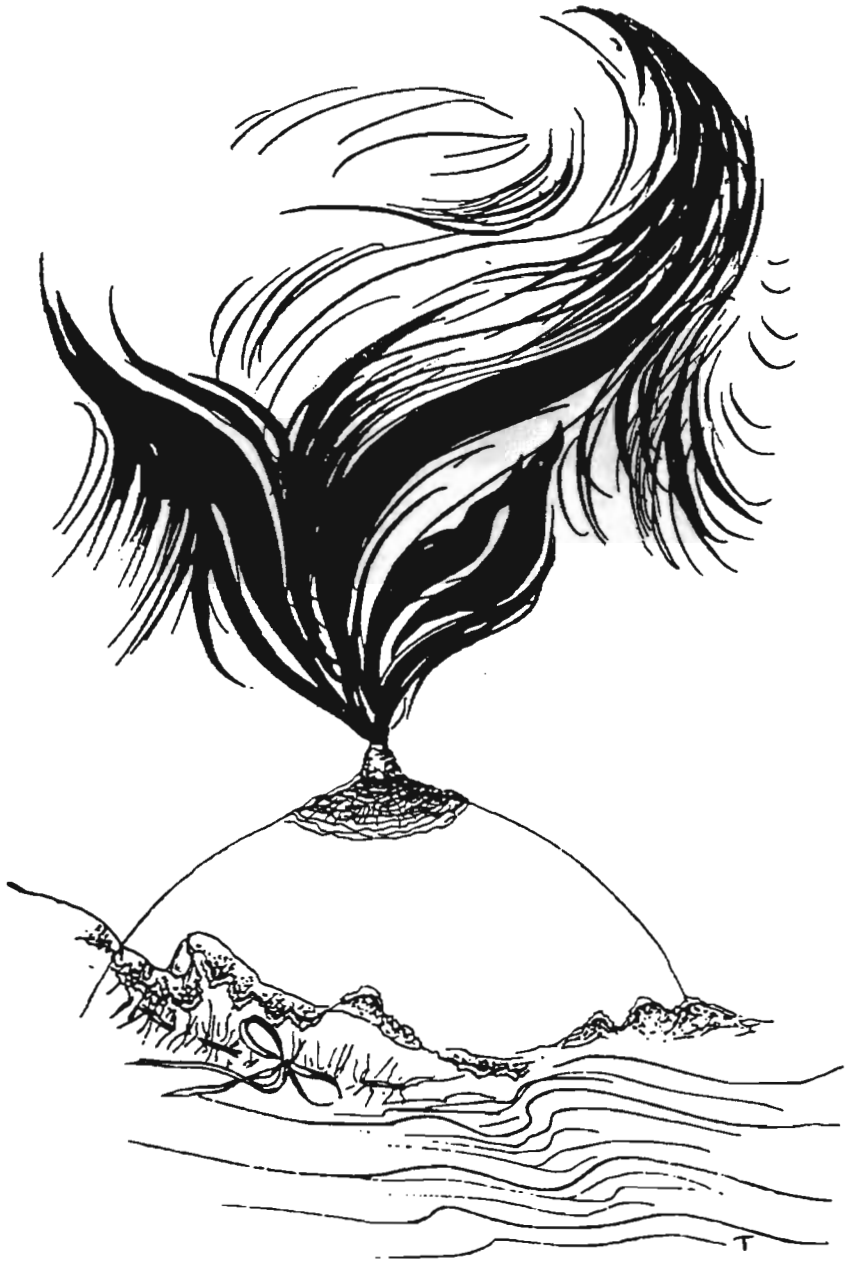
Gossip where She Had Been Unable to Find or Recognise Her Rooms. They took off the old man's head for now he was nothing more than a miniaturised dolmen and the young girl carried it off. For a while, the dolmen continued to cry out "Alfinete! Alfinete!" but its voice quickly became feeble and finally fell silent. Then all the leaves on the trees in Paris fell in one swoop and the young woman full of suspicion took the dolmen out of her bag and recognised her father whom she immediately threw into the Seine, because, to walk around with one's father in one's handbag is, for a young woman, really too ridiculous. If only it were her lover, that could be understood, but her father! And since that day, to avoid similar misadventures, she has locked herself in a blue room.

Natural History

Benjamin Péret



Illustrations by Toyen.

The Four Elements

THE WORLD IS COMPOSED OF WATER, earth, air and fire. It is not spherical but shaped like a bowl, and is one of the breasts of heaven. The other is to be found at the centre of the Milky Way.

I. Earth

Earth breeds flies, phantoms which are there to watch over it by day and guard it during the warm weather. When it is cold, dried earth shrivels into pumkins and needs no watching over. But during the summer smoke pours out of its ears and, without flies to direct it upwards, this would lie around like bundles of dirty linen.

When thoroughly watered, earth brings forth the following:

1. Lipstick, which is what kisses are made of. There are two kinds of lipstick—wavy lipstick coming in long ripples which, when distilled, produces flags—and light lipstick which bears the flowers that turn into kisses. There are, however, two very distinct ways of obtaining these. It can be done either by drying the blossoms the very moment they burst open, or by crushing the seeds to obtain a perfume which evaporates so quickly that it is almost impossible to hang on to it.

2. Turkish baths, which come from kneading damp earth with yoghurt. These make such a disgusting din that they have been gradually pushed

further and further into the desert .

3. Frogs, which are slowly eating away the earth.

4. Cellos, which are used more and more frequently to cure arthritis and which, when ground down to a powder, are very popular as a detergent which does not spoil the colours of delicate and flimsy underclothes.

5. Spectacles for people with short sight and which come from softening earth with pots of boiling china tea and then simmering it all in a steamer.

Many other things may be obtained also from dampened earth, such as compasses, sausages, boxers, matches, and prepositions that were still used by by our grandparents but which can only be found nowadays in antique shops.

By blowing on earth, i.e. by gently filling it with air, gooseberries are obtained. Tricycles come by blowing hard.

Mechanical methods (whose origins will be explained in greater detail later) permit greater quantities of air to be pumped into the earth, and have brought forth sieves. This is done by taking earth sprinkled with chicken droppings and subjecting it to a powerful stream of air which has been carefully kept at room temperature. Once reduced to dust the loamy earth is enclosed in a receptacle in which the air, agitated by a powerful propeller-fan, goes from freezing point every five minutes to fifty degrees above zero and vice versa, and produces caretakers. These were discovered originally by the Prince Consort, and have since been very much perfected, but do not last as long as they did in the good old days.

In a receptacle containing air at a pressure of three atmospheres and which is subjected to a very low temperature, earth gives us knitting needles. By increasing the pressure and lowering the temperature we also get blackbirds, cradles, green peas and beastly motor-bikes.

Thinly sliced and toasted, earth turns into fish-hooks. Thickly sliced and shrivelled to a cinder it turns into urinals. Rolled into balls that explode in the flames, it produces cockchafers and, if the balls are large enough, moustaches.

II. Air

Air, in its natural state, constantly secretes pepper which makes the whole world sneeze. At ground level this pepper condenses so as to give trinkets in summer and newspapers in winter. These only need to be put in a cool place for them to be transformed into railway stations or sponges, depending on how many pages they contain. Pepper also becomes condensed at two thousand five hundred feet up in space, after which it falls back to earth as such a fine dust that nobody ever notices it. Therefore, when the

accumulated evidence of this flagrant futility does eventually begin to make an appearance, the man in the street automatically treads on it and flattens it without showing any signs of conscience. Higher still, pepper is what puts the sparkle into starlight.

When painted blue, air provides undergrowth in dry weather, and bleach when it rains, but it can be dangerous to human beings if taken in large doses as it causes stomach ulcers and blisters, and also rots the teeth. When painted yellow, air is used for making furs and, mixed with cockchafer powder, it cures lockjaw. When sugar is added, air is used for mending inner tubes, and if salt is added, it makes beds. When warmed between the hands it increases in size until it is transformed into whips. Shredded into mincemeat and doused with red wine, orchestral conductors may be produced, and these are always extremely useful to country folk at harvest time. Dried in the sun and kept throughout the winter in a very dry place, air will provide engagement rings in springtime, but their extreme sensitivity to variations in temperature makes them very fragile and they rarely survive into adulthood.

Kept in a sealed cupboard, air has a tendency to escape. When it succeeds in doing this, it expires at the threshold in the form of mushrooms. These are often used today for smoothing away wrinkles.

Steeped in vinegar, air produces dock-hands who, in windy weather, run like over-ripe cheese. In such cases tender dock-hands are collected, dried, and then carefully ground so that they may be sown in spots well away from direct sunlight. After a month, the moon rises from these spots, forcing its way out of the earth in order to bloom, as it is not a star as so many people seem to think, but merely the pollen of the innumerable female flowers of the tender dock-hands, which rises from the earth every evening, while the male flowers fall back to the earth so that their seed may spring up again. Each morning the moon sinks down into the sea where, bouncing against the waves, it sets up tides until eventually it melts and, as it dissolves, flavours the sea with salt.

III. Water

In the form of rain, water becomes earthworms burrowing their way into the ground. These worms, going to enormous depths, gather in vast masses in the earth's natural cavities and, when they split, produce crude oil. Several varieties of this oil are worth noting:

1. Studded oil, which has a very brief duration period since, once formed, it is immediately eaten away by moths.

2. Seeded oil, which elephants find irresistable because it makes their

tusks grow.

3. Unicorn oil, which is completely useless as oil. Only the horn, decomposing under wind pressure, will give marathon runners, who are in constant use when making china for the purification of clay. This has been previously purified of all noxious matters by the application of strong doses of octopus ink.

4. Hoarse oil, which has been given this name because of the disgraceful raucous noises it makes. This is the oil that causes blisters that spread extremely infectious diseases.

5. Hairy oil, which clings to the bark of trees in cold countries and eventually gives, in swift succession, sparrow's eggs, Chinese crackers and hat-pins. The crackers and the hat-pins together produce red billiard balls that are a menace to carp. They are so ferocious that within a few days whole ponds which were once full of fish are turned into deserts, after which the red balls expire through lack of nourishment, at the same time producing will-o-the-wisps.

6. Snowy oil, which is only to be found at the tops of the highest mountains of Europe. At a height of two thousand five hundred yards this oil loses all its properties, becomes dull, tarnished and brittle, and when exposed to sunlight, turns into chairs, a species of lemur which looks harmless, but whose extremely poisonous bite can be fatal if not rapidly attended to.

Chickens, whose feathers are keenly sought after for making low gradients, come from river water by moonlight. However, these chickens do not have feathers in summer, and their sprouting quills are like red teeth which are shredded to make candles which are most useful in the country for locating underground lakes. Such underground water is inhabited by multitudes of keys which, as soon as a well is sunk, slip out through the shaft and build nests at the top of the tallest tree with piercing shrieks. As soon as night falls, they gang up in groups to attack dogs who run for their lives when they see them coming, yelping blue murder.

Once it rises to ground level, well-water evaporates, leaving a brilliant emerald residue at the bottom of the well. When warmed, well-water becomes hard, expands and, at a temperature of eighty degrees, acquires great elasticity which makes it liable to turn into kangaroos in two or three days. But these kangaroos are subject to diseases of the respiratory tubes, as well as to tuberculosis, and this plays havoc with their numbers. This is why deadwood kangaroos, which are rather more hardy than the other types, are the choice of rabbit-breeders since, once the rabbits have been in contact with the kangaroos, their fur takes on a soft silky texture which is perfect for making flags. When temperatures fall below zero, well-water is transformed into beggars. Cut into very thin slices, these are used for making grottoes.

Sea water, once it has evaporated, leaves behind a silk whose long life

is a source of constant amazement to man. Certain female silks, a thousand years old, and which still produce four litters of brandy glasses a year—each litter comprising at least a dozen glasses—have been quoted. It is obvious that, under conditions such as this, the brandy glass would have become a plague to man worse than locusts, had he not discovered in crutches an even more implacable ally.

Indeed, one single crutch annually devours hundreds of thousands of brandy glasses and, in equatorial Africa alone, crutches, of which at least twenty different species are known, make up endless armies which, after devouring every brandy glass in sight, turn to terrorising the natives whose harvest of calves' livers they completely destroy, thus reducing them to poverty and famine.

Finally, we should mention bearded-water, whose nature is still not very clear (although it may be made into armour which is very suitable for little old ladies who feel the cold rather badly); flying-water, which navigators use to take their bearings; light water, which is the basis of swimming-trunks; hardwood-water, which is indispensible to sweet-makers; dusty-water, which is useful in carpentry; feathery water, which is hunted in December just at the moment when the feathers take on their most brilliant hues; and clinker water, which is mainly used in electricity, but also has many other uses which we shall investigate later.

IV. Fire

Essentially a mineral element, fire dwells in stones and eggs. Trembling stones are the ones which, when damp and exposed to sunlight, give the best kind of fire. This is soft, sweet, velvety and perfumed, and is currently used for burning down churches. But such stones should not be allowed to tremble too much, as, if the trembling is over-pronounced, the fire will melt and turn into a hot spicy sauce whose heat scalds people touching it and stings them with begonia to make them yawn from morn till night. If the trembling is not intermittent, the fire will crackle and spurt out damp moss which will extinguish it, but also serve as a breeding ground for those fleas which are so dreaded by dyers and cleaners because of the mess they make of their colours. Disturbed by these fleas, colours do indeed lose their glittering sparkle and freshness, so that it becomes impossible to maintain a uniform tone. On the other hand, this kind of disturbing action is exactly what is sought by dyers who require marbled or textured effects. Therefore they capture the fleas and put them in equal quantities in sealed jars with the dye and keep the mixture at a fairly high temperature for varying lengths of time, depending on whether they want to achieve an effect of marble or of watered

silk.

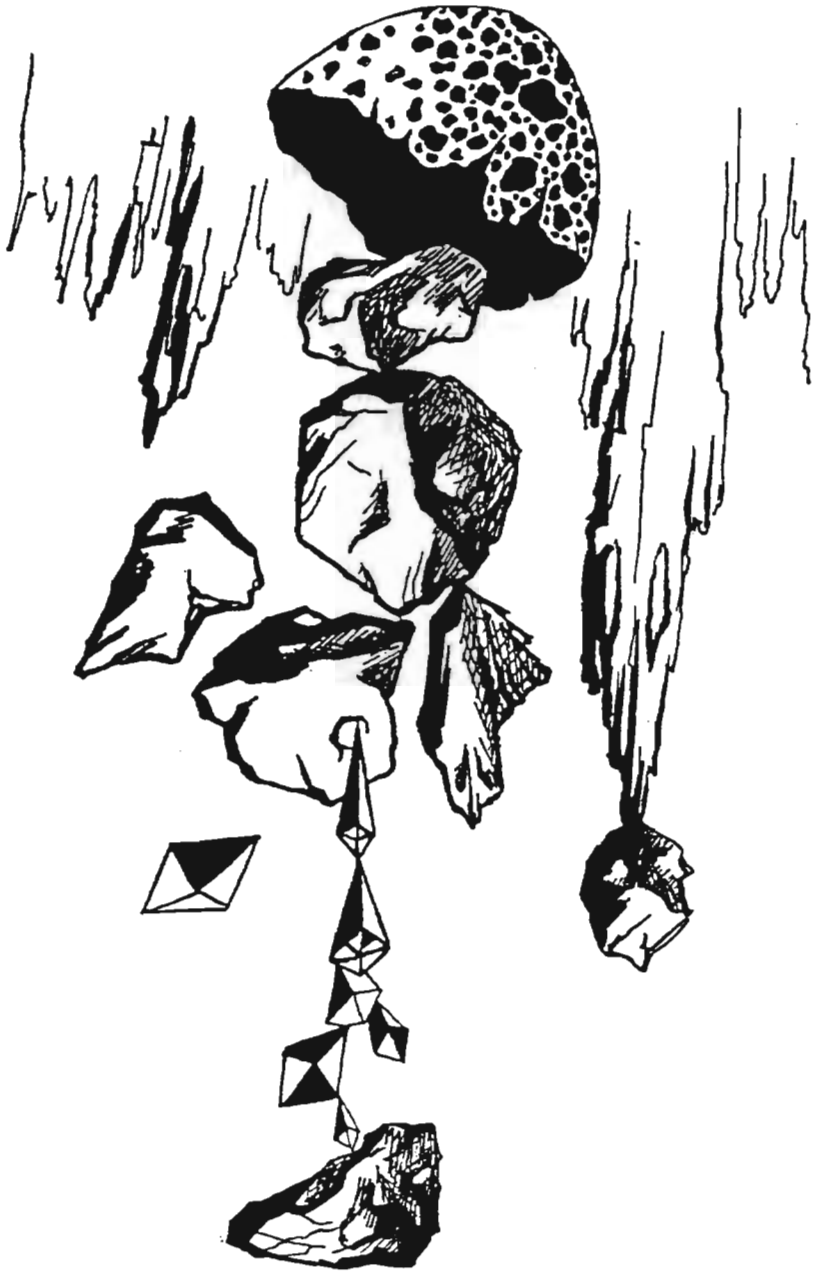
Left out in the rain for a whole winter, wind-stones produce fierce fires whose life is, however, very short unless great care is taken to plunge them in the sea before using them, i.e. before putting them in those lobster-pots which are ideal for kindling fires. The fires then attract moles which are their main source of nourishment and thus help to extend the length and intensity of their life.

The amount of different fires that are known is considerable. Amongst the most common must be counted tatter-fire from which we obtain bottles which, when plunged into quinine baths, give such ferocious fires that special tools are needed to cut them into the resilient lightweight planks which children use to make their kites. Wellington fire is also not difficult to find, being the result of a mixture of sleeping-cars and wheel-barrows, and it is greatly sought after by composers. Stretched out on soft and well-brushed beds, when it has been lightly sprinkled with salt, it plays symphonies, and when it has been splashed with ink, it sings operas. One of the most common types of fire, stinking-fire, is obtained by soaking bishops in cod-liver oil. It gives off a noxious odour, but this is excellent for the growth of asparagus shoots, as it puts paid to the drawers which nibble at them. We may also give the example of cloudy-fire which stops rats and mice invading empty houses; passage-fire which fizzles out as soon as it is squirted from hypodermic syringes; taffeta-fire, which is essential in pastry-making; ostrich-fire, which every girl slips into her bra when going to her first dance; hobbling-fire, which scares doctors stiff since it starts epidemics (which must be fought off as soon as they appear with an inhalation of leeks); whipped-fire, which prevents villagers from sleeping on the night before the grapes are gathered in; twig-fire; pill-fire; dry-fire; black-and-white-fire; striped-fire; doctrinal-fire; etc.

All these types of fire are frequently encountered in their more-or-less pure states in all parts of the surface of the globe. They can be very easily cleaned, either with fish-bones or by filtering them through blotting-paper which has previously been soaked in vinegar. However, much rarer varieties of fire are also known, such as button-fire which suits blondes so well, or brain-fire which is produced with great difficulty by crushing turkeys with twitch-grass to make a smooth paste which is then put out to dry in the sun after sprinkling it with equal quantities of very fine iron and copper filings. If the filings are not fine enough, the paste will run and produce small change; if it is too fine, birds will come and peck at it, causing it to explode and give out clouds of skin-clinging black dust which can only be got rid of by painting the affected areas with tincture of iodine. After a few days a nut of brain-fire can be discovered on cracking open a pound or two of this paste which has been allowed to dry. One must still be very careful to avoid dropping it on wool as this would be liable to become inflamed. When this

brain-fire is crushed and compounded with clusters of heliotrope flowers, which have also been reduced to a powder, it is made into a night-cap for women wishing to acquire beauty spots. Amongst the rarest of the remaining fires we should still note shutter-fire, which rises from volcanic ash long after the eruption has taken place, and which, at the rate of a few ounces per ton of ash treated with cider, makes it very scarce; dewlap-fire, which is used as a decorative motif; flying-fire, which it is strictly forbidden to take into fashion-houses as it stirs up the passions of the needlewomen against the wives of their bosses; rose-fire, which is found at the crack of dawn in the woods in springtime; cross-bow-fire, which is a very rare disease of the horns of cockled snails (one in ten thousand has it); quivering-fire; braces-fire; breast-fire; and, last but not least, crumb-fire, which female penguins sometimes secrete when laying their eggs, although it evaporates after a few moments if not gathered immediately and put into fresh cream.

Mexico, 1945



The Mineral Kingdom

ONCE WATER, AIR, EARTH AND FIRE WERE TIRED OF dancing round and round an ice-cold flame of void, they blew it out. They sat down, worn out, and huddled against one another as they were cold and it was really just to keep warm that they had gone on dancing so long like bears in a cage.

—I am half dead, said fire, wiping his sweat-soaked brow. The sweat was evaporating fast and turning into fine snow which fell on their feet and froze them.

—We really must do something to avoid freezing, said earth and shivered so much that air, who was squashed between her and water, turned into a huge umbrella under which the others sheltered with their teeth chattering.

Water blew on her numb fingers which were as red as coals; the glow from them could have given them light. Something in them went solid and water began to work it mechanically between her fingers like an odd crumb of bread. After a few seconds, they heard a feeble bleat: water was holding a piece of sulphur in her downy hands, which were covered in soft hairs that shone in the gloom like good thick cream. They were all amazed and admired the sulphur which sparkled in the empty night like a sly piece of sun, and they all set out to imitate water. Fire even tried to go one better and clenched both fists, then blew on each in turn till he obtained in his left hand turquoise which instantly ran off howling like a beaten dog, and in his right hand flint, which fell and hit earth on the knee. There was a rumble like a waterfall. A spark flew off and set fire to the sulphur just as a sticky substance was

seeping from the air's fingers. This also caught fire on contact with the burning sulphur and brought forth plaster, so that this impalpable dust covered them with an impenetrable layer of white; but it insulated them from the cold and the darkness vibrating like a violin string.

Water, air, earth and fire now began to enjoy themselves so thoroughly that they no longer felt cold. Their hands recovered their natural agility and the game started to be fun; they tried to see who could be the most ingenious or the quickest to invent new minerals. They yelled, blew, whistled, sighed, breathed and sang at their hands, and produced in the process, among other things, copper, which appeared with a pirouette and a bow, and nickel, which cried heart-rendingly, so that they had to set about cheering it up—taking turns at first, and then since this produced no visible result, they all started cossetting it together, and crooning at it affectionately. It was no good, the nickel only ended up sobbing even more miserably. Fire lost his temper and shouted at it, and got so angry he kicked it out of the way. But it still went on moaning and whimpering for a long time; they all got upset and muttered imprecations at the beastly creature, which meant that for a while they could make nothing but boring schists, and lead and zinc and rust and other minerals with no shine to them, and quite without interest; they threw them aside disdainfully and sometimes angrily, as they appeared in their hands.

Air started yelling a rugby song at the top of his lungs, interrupted by the occasional sneeze, to the embarassment of water who blushed and modestly lowered her eyes; suddenly his hands felt so heavy he had to drop them at his sides, and the weight made his arms stretch a good three metres in one swoop, while his neck stretched out like a spring so his head bounced up and dangled on the end of it. Air groaned and some big fat drops which sparkled like tears in sunshine, dripped from his battle-scarred hands, dropping into the black void with a sound like an omelette splatting on the pavement; they then bustled off like thousands of ants abandoning their ant-hill after a rabid pick has dug it open. Mercury had been born. It continued for hours to drip from air's fingers, which were now as long as telephone wires on which swallows rehearse their migrations. Air was completely worn out and just stood there with his arms hanging at his sides. Water, earth and fire were wide-eyed with surprise and overflowed with joy and admiration and praise. Earth held out her hand like a dandelion flower to try and collect a few drops for a closer look, she wanted to slide them gently from one hand to the other. She even took it into her head to blow on them, with such an unexpected result that her jaw dropped and she caught her breath. Numberless crystals in thousands of different colours were fluttering in the hollow of her hands, twittering and tweeting for all they were worth.

They all stared at earth's hands in horror, even air who had gradually reduced weight and more or less returned to his normal weight and size, and

recovered the proper fan-shaped use of his hands, and his elder-pith arms. Water now collected a few drops of mercury on her hand, and whistled over it for some time. The mercury meandered unconcernedly with little hops between the life line and the head line, and water absently picked up a pinch of salt and crushed it between her fingers into a fine dust which covered the mercury. The next time she whistled the mercury stuck to her hand like a stamp on an envelope and at the third whistle it appeared to boil. She whistled once more, then shook her hand vigorously and opened it. Snorting and neighing and bucking and leaping to left and right, phosphorous appeared; it came to a halt in front of them and preened itself like a young dog out to please, while humming an incomprehensible tune. They were taken aback and slightly afraid at this curious performance; they cocked their heads to one side and were asking themselves mentally how such an exuberant ingredient could possibly be used, when it made a totally unexpected movement and threw itself at fire. It gave him a nasty bite on the thigh and then ran off giggling and crackling as fast as its legs could carry it, and disappeared into a cloud of rust.

Now they started mixing the minerals they had despised up till then, however they felt like it; they always remembered to add a drop of mercury. There were hoots of laughter and shouts of joy which sometimes winged away at top speed never to be seen again, but often they stayed circling above their heads. Earth was the first to have mica rise from her hands with big black eyes, waddling along like a well-to-do shopkeeper, carefully combed and freshly shaved and wearing its Sunday best; it was so completely absorbed in keeping up appearances that it fell down, falling so badly it ran like over-ripe Camembert. It was earth again who had solemn funereal marble come out of her hands; it greeted them formally and correctly in a cavernous voice which sent such a shiver up their spines they did not even try to hold it back when it walked off, with a stiff, dry, precise little nod, with the head turned just a fraction like an automaton, before disappearing into the distance behind a spout of methylene blue.

Fire brutally crushed two drops of mercury between his fingers producing a cloud of sparkling dust which would not settle anywhere except on them. It gilded them from head to toe. Earth was embarassed and started to scrape herself clean to recover her usual looks but soon she had to give up the thought that she could get rid of this layer of gold; it was settling on her as fast as she could scrape it off. And the dust hung in the air and blocked their eyes and ears, which hampered their efforts considerably. It was getting harder and harder; but then earth and air agreed to try hitting one another's hands, having primed them with a few drops of mercury and a chip of slate. The gold dust fell away like a lid, and in one bound emerald rushed off into the distance, ran back, took a look at them, and roared fiercely; then it threw

itself at air, tore him apart with its claws and gobbled him up in a flash, so it was nice and full, licked itself carefully, stretched out and fell fast asleep. The others were dumbfounded; they were appalled and fascinated at the same time, but when they saw the emerald lying there sleeping peacefully at their feet, they were furious. Fire angrily kicked at a block of agate which flew off and bounced from a granite rock onto a spike of rock crystal on which it was impaled with a long, blood-curdling scream. It writhed around spiralling with shock and pain in horrible contortions till they jumped up to the emerald and abruptly strangled it. They squeezed so hard and so suddenly that the emerald's eyes were thrown some distance and lay there shining like two stars of absinthe. Its belly burst open and air stepped out, now bigger and broader, built like a fairground wrestler; he was smiling and smoothing his hair, which was not quite so neat as before his brutal mishap.

—Isn't he lovely, cried earth smiling at him enticingly, he looks like the plume of a hat.

Water had been very upset by air's mishap, and she took umbrage at these words. She frowned so hard that her eyes looked as if they had gone parallel to her nose. She muttered various insults about girls who think they are irresistable, man chasers, and other tramps only good for disrupting marriages. Go and walk the streets! But earth took no notice. She did not even hear, but still smiling, with her eyes alight with desire, she minced towards air, who was already hooked and no longer hiding his feelings. Just when earth was about to throw herself into air's arms, fire gave her a kick on the backside so hard she was thrown for miles, where she fell with a dull thud. She lay there flashing with fury and trembling with rage.

—That'll teach you how to behave, said fire. And as for you, he added to air, I suggest you disappear pronto, or else . . .

He did not have to complete his threat. Screams of pain and fury made him turn his head. He saw earth and air locked in a writhing heap with minerals strewn all around them which burst, broke and fought as if they had gone mad. It was as if the fight between earth and water was the signal for a general free-for-all. Sparks and jets of icy vapour or scalding steam shot out in every direction. The minerals were divided into two camps, one supporting earth, and one water. So earth was clawed apart by coal, and a jet of nauseating acid half suffocated water, without the slightest let-up in the battle.

—Those fools will kill each other, said air with a fatuous smile.

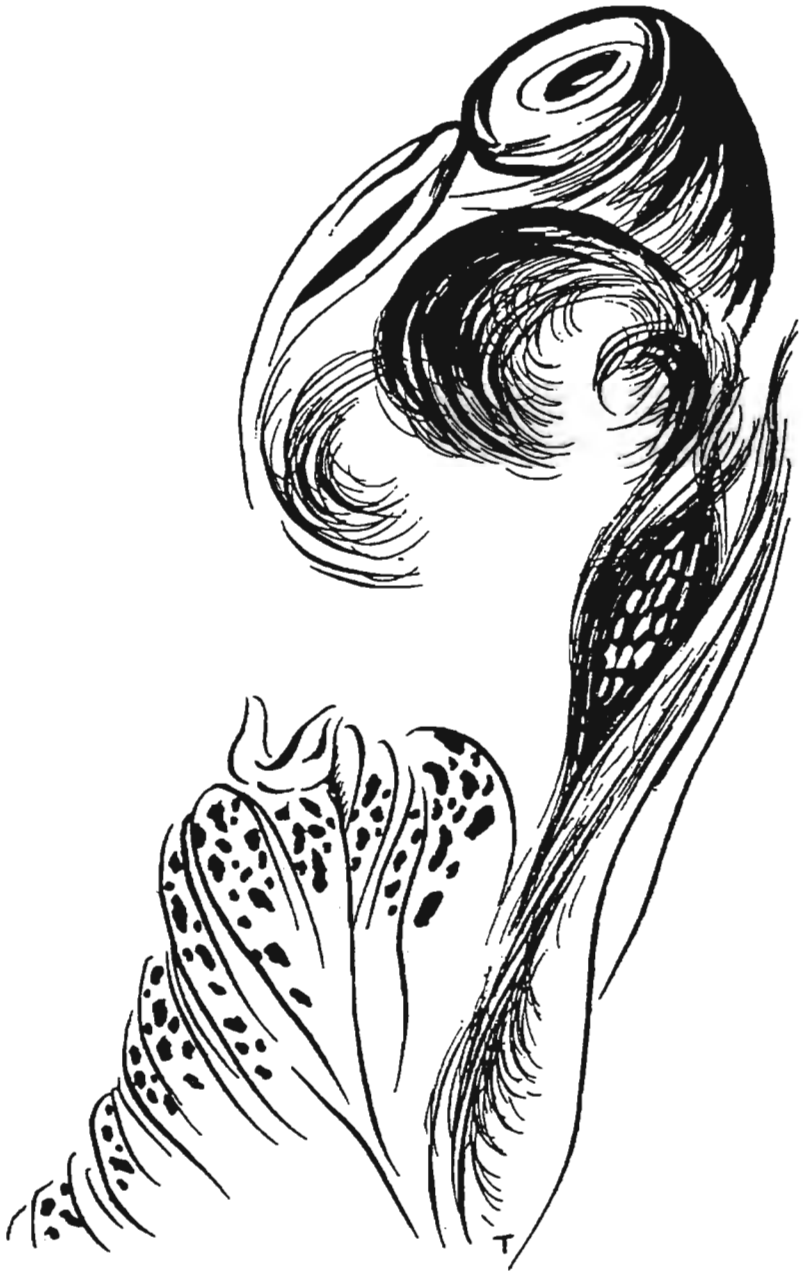
His smile exasperated air more than all that had happened before, and he slapped air so hard he sent him flying flat against the horizon where he was suspended unconscious.

With air out of the way fire turned to the raving viragoes. Earth already had two black eyes and water was almost bald, having been half scalped by

tin. Fire grabbed water by the feet and swung her round his head. She quickly unwound and turned into a huge lasso which fire flung at air and let go of the end he was holding. So earth coiled herself round air and started to fray, and the first river flowed out, rushing menacingly at earth who lay in a faint. The threat was so great that fire took fright and hid himself trembling under the earth. The fight between the minerals ceased as abruptly as it had started. There was complete calm and silence which covered everything. They all remained warily in their places. Water was so surprised by the sudden peace she dared not approach her enemy. Fire lay in wait beneath the earth.

And the sun rose for the first time.

Paimpont, 1950



The Vegetable Kingdom

THE BLADE OF GRASS, A SPARK RISEN FROM two pebbles clashed together, looked itself up and down and muttered: "I am good looking, but what's the point if I am alone? That must change and people must look at me." And it curled up, tied itself in a knot and undid itself till a tiny bit of it broke off and was blown away by the wind onto a patch of mica. The mica shook itself hard as if it had been stung or burnt, so that the blade of grass was thrown off and fell to the ground– but not without taking with it a chip of mica. A cucumber came up, inflated, then deflated, then reflated. The blade of grass looked at its handiwork and thought: "Well, that's one more sunset done!"

With those words it fell asleep; it was worn out by its first day of life. Meanwhile, while it slept, things were on the move around it. Flints with velvet pupils, solemn quartz, hypocritical marbles, dreaming jades crept up as carefully as Indian hunters to look at this new arrival which was blithely waving back and forth, taking poses, and winking at them without being asked. The jade was the first one who dared touch it–oh so delicately; he thought he recognised one of the family. It was enough to send an electric current through him, which gave birth to the cherry tree; the cherry rapidly lifted itself up on stilts and let its fruit hang lovingly. More boldly, a shard of iron stroked its hand up and down the blade of grass and brought from it immediately a violet coloured glow which ran off with quick little steps and disappeared into the ground a short way off. A few minutes later an artichoke came up from this spot and soon grew ten metres high; then it realised its

mistake and prudently came back down to its normal height. Meanwhile an opal threw itself at the blade of grass, and embraced it vigorously with a long kiss on the lips. It still failed to wake it, but an oak tree rose from the ground.

A fine rain began slowly to fall. Every drop that fell on the blade of grass evaporated immediately, but the vapour then condensed to form a new plant. A cabbage fell on its head which it squashed. A poplar tree took fright and tried to hide behind a star which had come out in the night sky, but fled quickly when it saw the tree. The poplar stopped dead in its tracks and wavered just long enough for the wind to change and fix it in its usual proportions for ever. The willow tree did not understand what was wanted of it. It tried to go back into the earth it had just come out of, so it bent down and bumped into the blade of grass. The grass was horrified, and stood groaning as it looked at the object before it; it had thought itself alone. Its whimpering extended to the early hours, though they had not yet come into view over the horizon; the sound seemed to want to meet them and take them by the hand but it made all the stones shiver uncontrollably. Some of them, especially granite, porphry and lava, actually trembled with fear. And they were right; the rain, which was now falling steadily, when it touched them, wove multicoloured crowns which dissolved very quickly to form seeds which germinated immediately. That is how the marshmallow came into being. It sobbed and frowned severely at the unconsolable mignonette: "Pull yourself together, will you!" At the same time the elm, still a boy, was hopping around looking for somewhere to fix its roots, chased by the hateful ivy, which shouted: "You will not escape, I'll get you yet."

Disorder reigned under the cover of the night. The honeysuckle came from nowhere zigzagging to escape a pine which was tilting at it and threatening to impale it. A pansy was sitting astride a heliotrope pulling out its hair in handfuls, and a magnolia freshly sprung from the earth could not escape rape by a bamboo which first tried to seduce it with a lullaby. Elsewhere an iris was comfortably settled at the top of a beech tree, but its triumph was short-lived. The beech shook vigorously and the iris was thrown quite a distance so that it skewered into the waterlogged earth, and was imprisoned there forever. On the right a walnut tree was bombarding a rosebush which shrewdly put out thorns to protect itself. To the left a marguerite daisy was stripping off its own petals to show how it loved the chervil which was hovering around it. Straight ahead the ash tree was furiously cracking pebbles. Behind it the vine was drunkenly singing a bacchic refrain in a syrupy voice. The whole place was an appalling free-for-all, an incredible orgy. The laurel bush assaulted the lilac which then took it out on the box-tree. The box turned shy and it took a long time for it to get over the ordeal, but no one can be sure it ever really forgot.

The tourmaline was frothing with rage in a corner while blushing to the roots of its hair with shame. "This really cannot go on," it resolved. It walked up determinedly to some stinging nettles, grabbed a clump, and began to whack at the vegetation. As it had already grown quite big, the greenery retorted: "Mind your own business you puritanical idiot, you fraud who cannot even work out what colour to be." The peach tree gave it a kick which sent it flying, then scratched the ground and pulled out the bramble, which surrounded the plants with an apparently impenetrable hedge. But the tourmaline did not give up. The peach tree's kick had knocked off a bit of its sparkle and it threw this over the bramble hedge; a thousand different sorts of cactus sprang up, all crammed against each other so that the plants had to keep completely still to avoid being pricked all over.

Calm appeared to have returned, but only precariously. The vegetation momentarily powerless, was only waiting for an opportunity to rebel. It was the storm that set things off. A tempestuous wind had followed the rain and in no time turned on its head the unstable order achieved by the tourmaline. The prickly pear was suddenly squashed up against the jasmine, which screamed so loud it scared the virginia creeper. The creeper was all set to climb over a rock but the jasmine's screams made it lose all its leaves at a stroke. But the jasmine recovered and shook off the prickly pear, a bulb at a time. What did the wretched things care! The bulbs laughed at the groaning jasmine, and each one stuck itself into the soil and multiplied then broke off and multiplied again so that soon the whole area was covered with prickly pears, till once again no one could move an inch. But their immobility did not last long, as the wind started blowing even harder. In one blast it carried off the potato, the turnip and the onion, which were methodically getting drunk at the top of an oak tree, and buried them. The same blast dragged the plum tree into a deserted corner with the sycamore and the chestnut, which flattened everything in their path, and started a bloody fight in the course of which the carrot was flayed alive and thrown into a hole, and the plane tree was so badly beaten up it was covered in bruises for ever.

Now thunder began to rumble in the distance, and then lightning ran across the sky. The clematis rushed forward trying to catch a streak of lightning. It finally succeeded, until then it had been a great tree, but the lightning carried it off, stretched it out and broke it, so the clematis ended up thread-like, and the lightning went away with a bit of it and threw it in the sea where it gave rise to seaweed. The seaweed multiplied rapidly in spite of the storm which tore it out in armfuls, which the waves washed up on the shore; they were crushed brutally against granite rocks, which turned them into reeds bristling with terror. Here and there the lightning whistled a waltz as it struck a flint which burst into a hawthorn bush, or a rock-crystal lightning conductor which dissolved to engender the tulip or the apple tree,

depending on whether the lightning struck the tip or whipped across the stem of the conductor. If the lightning struck an ordinary bit of limestone, it split open obsequiously to let the laurel spring out. The lightning was now coming down on every side, bringing out the mango tree, the raspberry cane or the lettuce here, the broom, the bracken and the vanilla orchid there, or the coconut palm, the sugar beet and the elder tree, all in a frightening state of chaos. So a lettuce more than eight hundred metres high bore raspberries, while a coconut palm bushier than an oak tree dropped plums at its foot, and the bracken had tomatoes hanging from its spores. All the vegetation was in this state and every plant complained. The elder was no bigger than a radish and groaned: "When will they be able to make reed-pipes from my stems?" The broom sighed: "Give me flowers, please, some flowers for pity's sake," and looked at its long, straight, dry trunk.

Everywhere you looked there was desolation and it was miserable to see the growing havoc—mistletoe coming out of the earth with cornflower blossoms, while roses bloomed in the pear trees. Nothing was in its place! And with the storm blowing for centuries, the chaos only went on getting worse. A willow was seen with flint arrowheads hanging from its branches and a black pebble gave off a heady whiff of garlic. There seemed to be no remedy and the flora seemed condemned to drift from species to species and had to get used to the most peculiar couplings. It was quite common for the flowers of a turnip weighing several tons hanging in mid-air to be fertilised by a wallflower, or for nuggets of obsidian to drip from faded peonies. Suddenly, when there was nothing to suggest that harmony would reign one day, the sky began to clear, and the storm moved on, and through the still heavy clouds a ray of sunshine was seen and the rainbow glistened with all its jewels over the spellbound earth. The vegetation understood at once and without protesting every plant quietly returned to the spot for which it was meant: the strawberry came down from the trees where it had been living as a parasite and lay flat on the ground, the plum tree which was creeping along the earth, stood upright, the vine which was as stiff as a cavalry officer, slackened and laid itself out to dry upon a rock and the other plants folllowed their example. There was nothing more to add.

Paris, 1958

The Animal Kingdom

HE VENUS FLY-TRAP YAWNED: "NOTHING to put in the pecker!" It looked all around and rolled its eyes ferociously, growling and grumbling against the cruel fate that had given it such a large appetite. Above it, the flame tree waved its long pods with a sound like castanets, as if just to taunt the fly-trap. A seed fell out of one pod and began to fly around back and forth, but it met another seed with which it coupled and soon thousands of flies and mosquitoes were criss-crossing the air. The fly-trap was very relieved; it would not die of hunger; from now on it could be sure of getting enough to eat. Even better, the flies and mosquitoes multiplied so fast that the fly-trap could not keep up; it was getting flushed, and was on the point of turning apopleptic. It stopped eating and fell asleep.

The trees and flowers and all of nature was now invaded by flies and mosquitoes and everywhere there was a feeling of disgust, almost nausea. "Who will get rid of these revolting objects?" asked a blooming rose, and shivered. Its shivering made its petals drop and drift away on the air. The wren, the blue-tit and many other birds emerged from them and sped off after the insects, whose debris piled up on the warm ground mixed with fragments of plants. The mixture rapidly fermented and soon the soil was swarming indescribably: ants had been born in their thousands and without delay they attacked the vegetation, which screamed with terror. "Have pity!" pleaded the sweet pea; "Help me!" moaned the plum tree; "Save me!"

squealed the walnut, but the ants did not pause for one moment. They sawed, they chopped, they snipped away, they laid waste all in their path. "That is quite enough," said the agave, "I am going to get this sorted out. And with one of its leaves it gave a prod to a briar. Out tumbled an anteater, curled up in a ball out of fear; then it realised that no one meant it any harm, and the smell of ants made its mouth water, so it set to work methodically and drove the ants to earth.

The agave was rather proud of this; encouraged by this first success it prodded with one of its thorns a pebble which was sunbathing beside a dried-up river bed. The pebble yelped with pain, and was immediately covered with a dark pelt and ran off moaning, having turned into an otter. Once out of reach of the agave it spotted a pond and dived in to cool its wound. The agave laughed and a grasshopper sprang from its mouth, and went and hid beneath stone. The agave, increasingly pleased with itself, took a handful of salt and threw it at the calyx of a gladiolus, and out jumped a cod, looking rather surprised. At the same time it spat at an oak tree whose bark soon rang with the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker's beak. This time it went really wild. It squashed a clump of borage and produced the mole, which dug its way into the earth in search of a cheese or a piece of gingerbread. Then it picked up its violin. It tuned the strings, and waves of worms came out. Then it started playing a waltz and a pig hopped out of the bow with a grunt, followed by a horse which was upset by the pig's grunting and ran away. "That's enough music!" shouted the rhododendron with a snort, which gave birth to several kangaroos. The agave was annoyed by this protest and walked away, saying: "We need some life around here. I shall shuffle the cards until the king of spades is an ace again and soap bubbles release turkeys when they burst, and pheasants and ducks and squirrels, which at the moment mope around in Turkish baths. And now my pipe has gone out! Little robin, come and give me a light." The robin meekly appeared from the agave's pipe and lit it before flying off. As it went on its way the agave thought, "Where shall I find a vanilla hair broom to make a lion with a beautiful mane? All I need is an ordinary syllogism, even a rickety one, which I could scratch with a beetle's wing-case to bring out a giraffe. And what could I not obtain from that? In white sauce the male giraffe produces the cormorant while hot, and the ibis when cold; cut it into thin strips and one can turn it into prawns and sea-urchins. When soaked in grease the giraffe will make a sparrow or a frigate bird, depending whether the sun is shining or there are clouds in the wind. And as for the female giraffe . . . My shoelace has gone and broken!" The agave bent down to re-tie its shoe-lace. It picked up the now useless end and threw it away without caring where it went. It was a primrose that started wriggling and struggling till out popped a dog the size of one's fist. It had a thin, thread-like tail, two or three metres long and hobbled around

on three legs, with the fourth one tucked up behind its head to make a sort of crest. But it barked with more strength than one would have expected from such a small creature. The agave picked it up by its cranial leg and rubbed it with sandpaper. The dog grew visibly, and wagged its upper leg for joy. Now it was normal size, but it still had that tail and that leg! The leg was quickly dealt with; the agave snapped it off with a quick movement, took one of its biggest thorns, poked a hole in the dog's skin and stuck the leg back where it should have been. The animal whimpered and the agave was upset and punched it so hard its face was smashed in. "Right! You can be a bulldog!" it said; but there was still the tail to deal with. The agave grabbed a synonym and cut the tail clean off—the animal came and licked its hands. "This will be enough for me to make a thousand breeds of dog," said the agave, and chopped the tail into little bits. It put one bit in a keyhole, and a Dachshund came out the other side. A second crumb of it, rolled in sugar, gave birth to the Sheepdog and a third piece was thrown into a drawer, where it mixed with the dust to make a Pointer. By mixing and combining the pieces with all kinds of ingredients—trapezes, litotes, sneezing powder, king and country, soldiers' cockades, etc.—the agave succeeded in producing all the dogs from the tail of the first one, but none of them barked except the first; so it picked up an alexandrine and started to beat the pack with it. The dogs soon began to bark and growl as if they had never done anything else.

"That's all right," said the agave, "now let's go on." It picked up a rule of proportion and dropped it in vinegar which began to fizz and swear, and then to laugh inanely, while at the same time turning as black as pitch. The monkey appeared and scampered off to bathe in the nearest river, making sharp little cries. The agave was as happy as could be. It sang, shouted, waved its arms and chattered, seized with a senseless exultation: "If one boils a candle and then rolls it in prepositions, it will give a kingfisher. Take one feather from the bird and stick it into the buttocks of a vaseline-coated moth-eaten square root, and the result will be the scorpion. And what about the shark? I can already see in it a pureed half-compass left out in heavy rain. Everything is possible: I shall extract the zebra from a smoked laundry-shed and the toad from a thimble of flowers; but I shall have to work in the moonlight so as to keep it apart from the flea. I shall crush the flowers of rhetoric to dust with crumbled diagrams until all the humming-birds fly out. And the devil if I do not find a dried flower between the pages of a psychology book which will make a very presentable ass when mixed with Prussian blue."

A lifebelt covered in moss lay in his path. He picked it up, brushed off nearly all the moss and said, "Come along, lizards." Nothing happened, but the lifebelt seemed to have difficulty breathing, so the agave slit it open on the spot and a wave of lizards hopped out.

The agave went on, "I know all the cetacians: the blue whale which is

extracted from grilled incense powdered with circumflex accents, the sperm whale made from a pine cone used as a fishing rod which breaks when you catch a block of sealing wax made furious by the cruel ill-treatment to which it has been subjected; and the dolphin born from the copulation of a loft with a haybox oven. And I know the felines too: the tiger which you find sleeping in a pocket where you have stuffed kissed hands, a paperclip, some jelly beans and an address book. It will only wake up if I decorate it with a delicately embroidered necklace of magnetic iron. Then there is the panther which was green at first when it leapt from a bugle bubbling with beer-froth. Several kinds of panther are known to science. Liquid panthers which rumble in mimosa woods in early spring and evaporate with the first storm; buttered panthers which were used to make fingers for monkeys; bivalve panthers which the wind makes sing out of tune; bearded panthers which can sometimes be found in shaving foam—they give it its special quality (without them shaving foam would just be a sort of liquid manure). Not to mention the terrible knife-blade or dumb-founded panther, which lurks in stations at night and eats up the points. And I can also see coming from a grain of sand which has been driven by the wind three times around its starting point, the floppy owl. It is covered in soft fish scales and it is trembling because it is about to dive into a river of warm milk to escape from an imaginary danger. When nothing happens it will come back up looking dishevelled, and blink. And over there is the toucan which I started making with the beak, which I cut from a sausage tree fruit, but I made a mistake and before I had time to put it right it flew off and started making an infernal racket in the back of a cupboard. Too bad for it!

"I put together a tortoise from a liquidised Archimedes principle with red tomato sauce folded into it; but what a circus that was! First it got mixed up with a caterpillar because the Archimedes principle evaporated just when I had got it out of the hollow of my hand. I had to rub it vigorously with a metal brush to give it a bluish shine, then feed it up with proverbs for several months and finally dip it in copper filings to give it a presentable shell, but it is so heavy the animal can no longer run, let alone fly as I had wished.

"I took a whipped sophism and made all sorts of pelicans: the pelican on springs which makes the colour yellow, the soapy pelican you boil to use in carpentry, the dead-wood pelican for unblocking taps, the legless pelican which sits on hen's eggs till the eggs lay more, and the horned pelican from which pipe-cleaners are made. But none of them had either plumage or a fleece, so they shivered in the cold. They were not complete pelicans. It was only after I extracted from white-hot flypaper the helical pelican—the one which shears sheep and lives on the wool—that I thought of soaking the next one in cod-liver oil. I marinated it for some time and it emerged just as we see them today. The rhinoceros was quite simple; it was born

unaided from a puff-ball. It was no bigger than a may fly, but then it grew like everyone else and when it thought it was big enough, it stopped. The same went for the elephant which worked its way out of a coconut thanks to its tusks, but it had no skeleton and slithered wretchedly around on the ground like a legless man, trumpeting with pain, for its delicate skin was scratched by the smallest pebble. It was so flat you would have mistaken it for a carpet. I took pity on it and made it a skeleton out of spider's thread which it swallowed. A moment later it stood up on legs eight metres long, as slender as a giraffe's, and with four knees, so that it kept falling down. I had to cut, fill out and shape its legs to give it a bearable existence.

"If I had to tell you everything, I would never get to the end. I had to spread speech around here and there, but it was still a mess. The starfish whined till it got on everyone's nerves, and the mouse croaked hoarsely in a language with no r's or s's. It argued endlessly about trivial nonsense with a fluty-voiced heron; though I suspect they barely made themselves understood as they were continually on the point of hitting each other. That is why I decide to cut man out from a prune. He was still tiny, but I felt sure that time would let him grow—it had promised it would. Man had barely started breathing when he stood up on his legs and yelled, "So where's the wife, then?" I said: "It's up to you to find her." So he collected some honey which was oozing out of a hive and shaped it to make his wife.

Paris, 1958

Prose: Collaborations