

Raoul De Jong

Excerpts from *Jaguarman* (2020) and *Boto Banja* (2023)

The son

Dear thou-who-art-my-forefather,

For these past few years, you've been playing a game with me. You gave me clues and I followed them. From Rotterdam to Paramaribo, from Rome to Recife. But every time I was on your tail, you sped away. We can't go on like this forever; I think you know that as well as I do. It's time to take stock of how far we've come. To put our cards on the table. All right, I'll begin: this is not a story about white or black or the Netherlands or Suriname, and it's not a story about my father, even though all those things play a role. This is a story about you. I'm told that you had supernatural powers and that those powers have something to do with me.

Is that possible? Just because we share a few genes, could your actions have influenced my life? When I look at my father and myself, I think, yes, they must have. For twenty-eight years he wasn't a father to me, yet we shared everything—much more than just our outward appearance. So it stands to reason there's also something of my father's father in me, and of my father's father's father. And all those fathers lead me back to you. My father tells me you had the power to change yourself into a jaguar, king of the Amazon, the strongest—and some say the cruelest—animal in the South American rainforest. How did you do it? Who were you? Where did you get your powers? And why does my father tell me I should leave those powers alone?

This is day one of a seven-day ritual to answer my questions, a ritual explained to me in a little gingerbread house with anti-theft grates and a rose garden in a district of Paramaribo called Kasabaholo, or "Cassava Hollow," by the seventy-nine-year old Winti priestess Misi Elly Purperhart.

"What my father told me—could it be true?" I asked Misi Elly. She was staring at something over my shoulder: a spirit, I thought, but when I turned around I saw a car parking across the street. She let out a secretive laugh and to my surprise quoted the Bible: "I, your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the crimes of the parents unto..." —and then with a roar—"...THE FOURTH GENERATION!"

Yes, it could be true. According to Christianity, *and* according to the Winti religion. I laughed nervously: "Then I'm cursed?" Misi Elly didn't know, but she did know how I could find out. "I'll tell you, but you have to follow my instructions. Otherwise we could have a disaster on our hands. This is serious business."

It would take me seven days, she said. Seven days without cigarettes, without alcohol, without meat, without salt, and without sex. And I couldn't start until I was back in the Netherlands, because you, Jaguarman, don't like flying.

It's 10:35 on a Monday morning in June, and I'm sitting in my bird's-nest studio on the eleventh floor of a high-rise, overlooking the Rotterdam harbor. The sun shines in through the windows, a flight of

gulls passes the balcony, and the roar of the highway is audible outside. All my deadlines have been met, all my bills paid. There are no cigarettes in the apartment, my phone's on vibrate, and my out of office reply is on for the rest of the week. For the next seven days, I'm all yours.

By this morning, I'd found everything Misi Elly had told me I needed except a *prapi*. That's because yesterday in the Winti store on Kruiskade, by the time I saw what a *prapi* was (an aluminum tub), I had already covered the counter with my other purchases. So this morning I used a blue plastic bucket instead, the same bucket I used for soapy water when I cleaned my apartment yesterday. I hope you don't mind.

I made an X on the bottom in white chalk, crushed half a ball of *pimba* (a kind of white clay) into a powder, poured molasses onto it from a plastic bottle, took some twigs from a tropical plant out of a bag I kept in the freezer, cut them to pieces over the bucket, added cold water, stirred it into a sludge with a wooden mixing spoon, and filled the bucket with hot water. "As hot as you can stand," said Misi Elly's written instructions.

The liquid was brown and steaming hot; the twigs got stuck in my hair. I doused myself with it, one cup at a time, using a little dish in which I made guacamole yesterday. "And as you pour, don't stand stock still like a statue," Misi Elly had said to me. "Talk! And your words will take shape." Her instructions told me what to say: "I am washing myself to become enlightened. All the uncleanness I have picked up in the street, at work, or anywhere else, I am washing away." I had plenty of uncleanness to wash away, so I spoke with conviction. "Everything that was unclean is gone now," I said, and then I realized the walkway was right outside the bathroom window and anyone passing could hear me.

I turned on the water and showered. Then I swept the twigs and brown water into the shower drain with a cloth and rinsed out the bucket. I made a new X on the bottom of the bucket, put dried roses on top that Misi Elly had given me from her garden, covered the whole thing with a red elixir called "Seven Spirits," and filled the bucket with lukewarm water. This time I said, "I am washing myself with this water to give my body strength, the strength my wintis need."

As Misi Elly had instructed me, I'd placed my outfit for the next seven days on my desk chair, folded and ready for use: a bright white T-shirt and a pair of tight white gym shorts, looking fresh as a daisy. Under this outfit I put on white thermal underwear; I hope that's OK.

Then I opened the top of my vintage Swedish-designed ebony writing desk, which had cost much more than I could afford. Eight months ago, I'd set it up as an altar, with all the objects that you, Jaguarman, have sent my way over the years. This morning, I lit a light blue candle, opened a fresh notebook, and said, "Thou who art my forefather, reveal thyself."

I don't recall how I'd pictured this moment, but nothing happened. All I saw were the same books I see lined up on the desk in front of me now, books written by people who look like my father and me, and like you. Their names are Anton de Kom, Edgar Cairo, the Penard brothers, Leo Ferrier, Astrid Roemer, Rita Dulci Rahman, Bram Behr, Iwan Brave, Tessa Leuwsha, Reinier Artist, Frank Dragtenstein, Clark Accord, Nina Jurna, Juliën Zaalman, and Ellen Ombre. I found them thanks to a series of strange coincidences, in second-hand bookstores, at Winti celebrations, on websites for book collectors, and through conversations with architects, archeologists, bonu men, and dance instructors in the Netherlands and Paramaribo. Maybe somewhere in all those stories I found, your voice was speaking to me, but I still don't understand quite what you were telling me.

“But I don’t want to end up with a psychosis or anything,” I’d told Misi Elly. Seemingly deaf to my words, she just nodded and said, “Do it, do it. Do it. You have to do it.” What I discovered might be bad, she told me, but it might be good. And with a mischievous laugh, she added, “And it would be much better if you don’t say anything to your father.”

While we picked the roses for the ritual in her garden, I realized there was a small but significant detail I hadn’t mentioned yet. Not until we were saying goodbye at the garden gate did I tell her, “Oh, yeah, by the way, I’m working on a book.”

Misi Elly didn’t seem to see anything devilish in that. She replied, “Then you should write it.”

She said it would give me insight—in waking life and in my dreams. And she told me what to say before I started: “Father, I will take everything in. I place everything in your hands. Father, you are God, you are my father, you are everything to me. You will never abandon me, and I have faith in you. Something happened, I know. As you once said, the crimes of the fathers will be passed on to the children. It doesn’t have to be a crime; it could be something good. But you are saving something for me. Reveal it to me.” So now I’ve said it.

Jaguarman, whoever you are and whatever you want to say, I’m ready to face it: the truth and nothing but the truth. Let’s start at the beginning.

I never had the feeling I was cursed, Jaguarman. I didn’t have a father, but I had a mother, three aunts, an uncle, three blond boy cousins, three blonde girl cousins, a grandma and grandpa, and a whole line-up of ancestors from Friesland and Groningen dressed in peasant smocks and golden headdresses, and that was strange and wonderful enough, because these were the gifts that life had given me. Until December 10, 2011, when I received an e-mail:

im searching for my son raoul de jong 😊😊😊.

I still remember exactly where I was when I read it: sprawled on a mattress in my squalid little room without central heating on the top floor of the low-rent building where I was staying as part of Rotterdam’s anti-squatting program. It felt as if everything was falling apart, as if I’d been caught red-handed. As if all my life I’d been on the run from the secret police and now an officer had called my number. As if nothing would ever be the same again. And of course, that turned out to be true.

I replied, “WHO ARE YOU???” The next day, I received a reply:

That was your father. This is his girlfriend. Your father is searching for his children.

I pictured two junkies somewhere in a room not so different from mine, cooking up nefarious plots to wring money out of his long-lost son, in the misguided belief that since I wrote books I must be wealthy. I replied that I wanted a reply from my father first. I wanted to know why he was suddenly looking for me after twenty-seven years. Two weeks later I still hadn’t heard back from him. And that

was that, I told myself. I could breathe again.

But you didn't stop there, Jaguarman.

Five months later I ran into Jim, the only other half-Surinamese person I'd known well as a child. When I was ten and Jim was twenty-one, he was my babysitter one night a week while my mother took evening courses for an art degree. Jim and I hadn't seen each other for more than ten years. He told me he'd visited his own Surinamese father, who had died soon afterwards. "He's the only dad you've got," Jim said. "Look him up while he's still around."

When I got home, I searched my old e-mail account for the message from my father's girlfriend, and I saw that in fact my father had responded, four months after my last e-mail, on March 12, 2012.

MY DEAR SON RAOUL, I AM DELIGHTED TO HAVE HEARD FROM YOU. IT MAY BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR YOU TO IMAGINE BUT THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I HAVE BEEN PRAYING FOR ALL THESE YEARS. FOR GOD TO REUNITE ME WITH ALL MY CHILDREN, FOR GOD TO GIVE ME A CHANCE TO MAKE UP FOR MY PAST FAILINGS. A CHANCE TO ASK YOU ALL TO FORGIVE ME FOR NOT BEING THERE FOR YOU. CHILDREN DO NOT ASK TO BE BORN, BUT IT IS PLEASURE, TWO PEOPLE ENJOYING THEMSELVES, THAT LEADS TO IT: A CHILD. SOMETIMES WE THE PARENTS CANNOT OR WILL NOT SHOULDERS THE RESPONSIBILITIES, BUT I HAVE KEPT YOU ALL WITH ME IN MY HEART ALL THIS TIME, WHETHER I WAS THERE FOR YOU OR NOT. I THANK GOD FOR LETTING YOU GROW UP INTO THE MAN YOU ARE TODAY. MY SON, MAY THE LORD PRESERVE YOU, PROTECT YOU, AND MOST OF ALL, LOVE YOU. LET US APPROACH EACH OTHER WITH OPEN MINDS, WITHOUT JUDGING OR FEELING GUILTY TOWARD EACH OTHER. AND OF COURSE A VERY HAPPY TWENTY-EIGHTH BIRTHDAY TO YOU TODAY. YOUR FATHER. WHO LOVES YOU VERY VERY MUCH. GOD BLESS YOU MY SON, YOUR FATHER HUMBERT

This, Jaguarman, is how you brought my father back into my life after twenty-eight years. A grand, dramatic entrance, with capital letters and help from God.

I'm no fool, Jaguarman; of course I always knew there must have been a father in the picture somewhere. "Each child chooses what parents to be born to," my mother used to say. She'd picked that up in some course for developing your intuition. I always replied, "That's easy for you to say." It was my mother who had chosen my father, not me.

If it had been up to me, I would have chosen Rio de Janeiro, London, Tokyo, Rome, or New York, but it happened in 1983 in a country where it always rains and where everyone is always complaining, in a city that was destroyed in a war and then rebuilt bit by bit out of asphalt, cement, and concrete. That night my mother was on her own at the Tudor Bar, a grimy hole in the wall on Nieuwe Binnenweg. Most of the customers were young and either Surinamese or else art students. She lived around the corner and always ran into people she knew there. They played good music at the Tudor. Soul. That night he was standing on stage, a dark-skinned man with dark-skinned friends, surveying the people on the dance floor. He flashed her a smile and said something flattering, something like, "Hello, young lady." Swit'talk, they call it in Suriname, I know that now. It worked. "Your father made me feel like a princess," my mother said. I said, "Eeeew."

They had a fling. My mother tells me it lasted two months, tops. In that time, the rest of my

family met him once—on my mother’s twenty-third birthday. My father and a friend of his were supposed to cook for the family. They arrived three hours late. The way my aunt Hilda tells it, they looked like the members of Earth, Wind & Fire, “in leather jackets and tight pants.” My grandpa wasn’t impressed. “I don’t know what she sees in that man,” he once said from his white grandpa easy chair throne in the living room, where he sat for his whole adult life. “Plenty of other people like that”— Surinamese people, he meant—“*have* made something of their lives.” (Jaguarman, please don’t get the wrong idea. My grandpa would never say anything like that these days. He’s a sweet man who was just repeating what he’d learned about Dutch history in the 1940s, and he’s changed too. He went through this whole process from up close.)

As soon as my father had won my mother’s heart once and for all, he lost interest. My mother realized she had to act fast; she’d decided she wanted a child and chosen this man as the father. “But why him?” I asked. She couldn’t really say. But it had to be him and no one else. She knew my father would not be a father to me, but she never saw that as a problem. She had always been at odds with her own father, my grandpa, who because of my mother’s choice became the man for whom I pasted together presents in nursery school on Father’s Day.

In the light of everything that followed, there’s one detail I shouldn’t leave out of my story, Jaguarman: in the kitchen of a Surinamese friend of hers, my mother took a bath with special herbs from the Surinamese rain forest to increase her fertility. She had misunderstood her friend’s instructions, so instead of pouring the water over her head with a bucket, she made it in the bathtub and soaked in it.

A few weeks later, my mother was standing on a ladder whitewashing the walls of her new home when she felt it. Something moving in her belly. What I’d planned to write here was: “She didn’t know what lay ahead, just as I don’t know now, yet in that single second it all flashed before her eyes. A whole lifetime, everything behind us and everything still to come.” But my mother says that’s an exaggeration and I’m making up a story that belongs to her. In any case, she knew there and then that it had worked. Inside her was a child.

Translated from the Dutch by David McKay

An excerpt from *Boto Banja* (2023)

Of course I feel a little silly, standing there in my sailor suit on that catamaran in the Dominican Republic. Surrounded by gifts for the unseen forces that will hopefully protect us during the crossing to Curacao. It doesn't help that Russel, the second skipper, is watching the whole scene from a distance with raised eyebrows. Laura, our captain, had wanted extra help during our trip and Russel was my only friend with sailing experience. He is a handsome Venezuelan Canadian with whom I once spent five nice days in Bali. On the outside he's my polar opposite in many ways: tall, muscular, white, heterosexual—and it never occurred to me that that could become a problem. Until we were standing here together, surrounded by presents for the Vodou gods.

"Can't we just hoist the sails?" Russel asks impatiently.

Pretending not to hear him, I pour a cup of cold coffee into the water and say, "Papa Legba, open the gate. Papa Legba, open the gate. Papa Legba, open the gate."

From the moment Africans were enslaved, anything that did not match the role the "master" had devised for them could cost them their lives. Their given role was that of a "slave," and a slave had to be physically strong and mentally weak. It did not mean enslaved people actually were mentally weak. It just meant they had to be doubly smart to survive: they had to learn to play a "slave" on the outside so they could stay human on the inside. They found different ways to keep their African gods alive without the "master" being aware. In Saint Domingue—later Haiti— they did it very cleverly by hiding those gods behind images of Catholic saints. Erzulie Freda, the goddess of love, was hidden behind Maria. Damballa, the supreme god, was hidden behind Saint Patrick. And Papa Legba, the gatekeeper, was hidden behind Saint Lazarus. "And right here," as Zora Neale Hurston warned in 1938, "let it be said that the Haitian gods, mysteries, or loa are not simply the Catholic calendar of saints done over in black."

Vodou priestess Maria van Daalen once told me that she can see those gods – in Vodou they are called "loa." Always, everywhere. Dancing around us, pointing direction, whispering inspiration and making jokes, like the court of a king or the entourage of a superstar. They look like human beings, but three meters tall. They are handsome, radiant, a little mischievous and unapologetic for what they are. They are not just "nice" and "good." So we don't have to be either.

Under the water's edge Papa Legba appears. He is known in Suriname, Haiti and the United States: an old black man with a white beard and a straw hat on his head. He seems wise, not terrifying. He has experienced and seen everything that came before this. He is originally from the African kingdom of Dahomey. "Would you like to help me reach the gods of the water?" I ask, as Papa Legba is the god who clears the way to the other gods. Papa Legba frowns at Russel, who is standing, with a cynical look on his face, behind me. "Please?" I ask. "I'm writing this story for you too, Papa Legba." Papa Legba knows this is the truth and so he smiles: alright then. And ploop, he dives into the depths. Blowing up some more bubbles.

The first water spirit to appear is La Sirène, a black mermaid who, according to Haitian vodou, guards the treasures that were lost along the way and now lie shining at the bottom of the ocean. Sometimes, late at night, she will come ashore and, just like the Surinamese Watra Mama, she will sit on the rocks along the water, combing her long black hair with a golden brush. In Suriname, the dance that enslaved people danced to worship this goddess was considered such a great threat to authority that the 'masters' officially banned the Watra Mama dance and all dances that resembled it in 1776. According to *Verhandeling over den Landbouw in de kolonie Suriname*, a manual for plantation owners from 1787, the dance was "one of those secrets that a white person will never fathom." But what "white persons" did understand was that the invisible spirit summoned with the dance did not shy away from encouraging "slaves" to "run down the plantation and kill the whites."

I give La Sirene a pink Barbie comb and a little hand mirror and ask her to show me her treasures. The ribbons of my sailor hat flutter in a gust of wind. I hope this means she says yes.

Then I uncork a bottle of champagne and squirt the contents over the railing into the water, left, right, center. "What a waste," Russel grumbles. Again, I pretend not to hear him (and I consider whether I should write him out of this story) and say, "Papa Agwé! Master of the Sea!"

Bam! Crackling! Thunder! There he is: grand, gleaming, unbroken, hovering above the surface of the water, in an explosion of pink fireworks. Just looking at him is like sticking your fingers in the socket. He has dark skin and blue eyes, and he wears a sailor suit.

"Big Papa Agwé," I say, "who is like me, but bigger and better! You know what I'm doing here and you also know why I am doing it. Many things have gone wrong in the past. This is my attempt to heal some of it. I'm hoping this dance will make things a little better for everyone. Will you help me?"

He winks, he completely gets it. Of course. He shoots into the air like a rocket and immediately gets to work.

To conclude, I pour a glass of water in a circle around me and say: "Dear grandpas and grandmas, I need you, the Surinamese and the Dutch." "I need you Grandpa Freddy in your driver's suit, Grandma Tilly in your pink sixties dress, Oma Hilly in your flower blouse from the *Wibra* and Opa Ep in your beige grandpa jacket. "Are you coming with me?"

They shake their heads pityingly: couldn't you have done this at home behind your laptop? But secretly they are proud. And maybe even grateful for this adventure. None of them have ever been to the Dominican Republic.

"Okay," I say and turn around to my shipmates, "that's it."

Russell says he didn't like the ritual. Laura liked it. It reminded her of a ceremony she once did for Neptune, she says. I'm glad she says that. But still, I think, there is a difference. I never had to search to find Neptune. He came to me naturally, in high school, as part of a culture that was the cradle of our civilization. To find Agwé, I first had to come to believe that the story I'd always been told wasn't the whole story. I unraveled a worldwide web of dancing writers and only then did I understand that in the history of humanity we also had gods of my color. But of course I'm not saying all of this out loud.

Since I am on a sailboat for the first time in my life and we will sail to Curaçao in the middle of the hurricane season, we will start the Boto Banja today with a test trip: a few miles out to sea and back to Lupéron. Dana starts the engine, Russel plods across the ship, fiddling with winches, hinges, jib, booms, and ropes. I hobble after him, determined to absorb all the technical stuff. The sails are hoisted, the engine is turned off, and then there is the great open water, where everything once began.

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No one knows exactly how many people they were, but let's say millions. They came from Africa and were taken across the ocean to another world. They didn't come voluntarily, they were kidnapped. They were chained, tied together, pushed through a narrow tunnel in a stone fortress to the sea, and then their old life was gone forever. For months they floated in the dark over the water and when they saw the light of day again they were torn apart and sold as loose objects. One brother was 'sold' to a Dutchman and went to Surinam, the other was 'sold' to a Spaniard or a Frenchman and ended up in the Dominican Republic or Martinique. From that moment on they were 'slaves'. But it is a mistake to think they took nothing with them, or that they would ever forget where they came from.

As soon as it was possible, the descendants of these people jumped back on the ships. They did not come with a few, they came with many. They came from Trinidad, Guadeloupe, Martinique, the United States, French Guyana, Saba, Curacao and Suriname. Their parents were often still born into slavery, but they were free. They traveled to the mother country, or they visited their brothers and sisters, who had come on the same ships, to see how they had fared. And they left as their ancestors had come: by sea. If they had money, they bought a ticket. If they had no money, they hid themselves in the bow of the ship. Some of these people were writers.

This is the story of a secret society of dancing writers that was active around the 1930s. The books they wrote were much more than just letters on paper. I read them like magic formulas. Which help you to be a full, whole, round person. Together their books tell a huge, epic, wonderful but true story about oppression and liberation, about what lies on the other side of liberation and how you, as a human being, can celebrate that. I have studied their magic formulas and to prove to you that they work, I have put them into practice in the summer of 2022.

