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**Le fruit le plus rare ou la vie d'Edmond Albius by  
Gaëlle Bélem**  
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Gaëlle Bélem. *Le fruit le plus rare ou la vie d'Edmond Albius*. Paris, Gallimard, 2023, 20 euros.

With her second novel, just published by Gallimard, Gaëlle Belém takes the reader into the history of Reunion Island, long known as Bourbon Island. With her highly precise style, she follows in the footsteps of the slave Edmond Albius, who discovered the secret of making vanilla by fertilizing the stamen with the pistil. Indeed, how could a slave be the inventor of an enigma prized by the world's powerful leaders? In fact, the history of vanilla is intimately linked to colonial history, and to Hernán Cortés' attempts to bring it from the New World to the court of Charles V (pp. 75-79). In his turn, Louis XVIII also tried to unlock the secret of this thousand-scented flower, and botanist Ferréol Bellier-Beaumont was surprised by the fact that his slave surpassed him with a patient, self-taught invention. In a vein reminiscent of Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist*, where the valet becomes the confidant and true master of the story, the author plunges us into the depths of this discovery with great humor. Unfortunately, Edmond Albius (the name he gave himself when slavery was officially abolished) never received credit for his invention during his lifetime, and he suffered then a double penalty in being isolated and deprived of the fruits of his discovery. Gaëlle Bélem is the first Reunionese writer to be published by Gallimard, and her second novel shows an unrivalled sense of words to describe the intertwining of these three stories: that of Edmond Albius, that of Reunion Island and, finally, that of vanilla, which became a globalized object thanks to this anonymous inventor to whom the writer wanted to pay a heartfelt tribute: “In the dessert plates of the great bourgeois hotels, vanilla is irreplaceable. All desserts are studded with freckles, tiny black dots like ant's eyes staring out at hungry gourmets” (pp. 157-158, our translation). Precise historical and botanical details take the reader to the heart of this perfume's secrets.

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