

Betwixt and Between, Albert Camus

Betwixt and Between (L'Envers et L'Endroit)

She was a lonely and peculiar woman. She kept in close touch with the Spirits, took up their causes, and refused to see certain members of her family who had a bad reputation in this world where she found refuge. One day, she received a small legacy from her sister. These five thousand francs, coming at the end of her life, turned out to be something of an encumbrance. They had to be invested. If almost everyone is capable of using a large fortune, the difficulty begins when the sum is a small one.

The woman remained true to herself. Nearing death, she wanted shelter for her old bones. A real opportunity occurred. A lease had just expired in the local cemetery. On this plot the owners had erected a magnificent, soberly designed black marble tomb, a genuine treasure in fact, which they were prepared to let her have for four thousand francs. She purchased the vault. It was a safe investment, immune to political upheavals or fluctuations in the stock market. She had the inner grave prepared, and kept it in readiness to receive her body. And, when everything was finished, she had her name carved on it in gold letters.

The transaction satisfied her so completely that she was seized with a veritable love for her tomb. At first, she went to see how the work was progressing. She ended up by paying herself a visit every Sunday afternoon. It was the only time she went out, and it was her only amusement. Toward two in the afternoon, she made the long trip that brought her to the city gates where the cemetery was. She would go into the little tomb, carefully close the door behind her, and kneel on the prie-dieu.

It was thus, quite alone with herself, confronting what she was and what she would become, rediscovering the link in a chain still broken, that she effortlessly pierced the secret designs of Providence. A strange symbol even made her realize one day that in the eyes of the world she was dead. On All Saints' Day, arriving later than usual, she found the doorstep of her tomb piously strewn with violets. Some unknown and tenderhearted passers-by, seeing the tomb devoid of flowers, had had the kind thought of sharing their own, and honored her neglected memory.

And now I think about these things again. I can see only the walls of the garden on the other side of my window. And a few branches flowing with light. Higher still, more foliage and, higher still, the sun. But all I can perceive of the air rejoicing outside, of all the joy spread across the world, are the shadows of branches playing on my white curtains. Also five rays of sunlight patiently pouring the scent of dried grass into the room. A breeze, and the shadows on the curtains come to life.

If a cloud passes over the sun, the bright yellow of a vase of mimosas leaps from the shadow. This is enough: when a single gleam begins, I'm filled with a confused and whirling joy. It is a January afternoon that puts me this way, face to face with the wrong side of the world. But the cold remains at the bottom of the air. Covering everything a film of sunlight that would crack beneath your finger, but which clothes everything in an eternal smile. Who am I and what can I do but enter into this play of foliage and light?

Be this ray of sunlight in which my cigarette burns away, this softness and discreet passion breathing in the air. If I try to reach myself, it is at the bottom of this light. And if I try to understand and savor this delicate taste which reveals the secret of the world, it is myself that I find at the depth of the universe. Myself, that is to say, this extreme emotion which frees me from my surroundings.

In a moment—other things, other men, and the graves they purchase. But let me cut this minute from the cloth of time. Others leave a flower between pages, enclosing in them a walk where love has touched them with its wing. I walk too, but am caressed by a god. Life is short, and it is sinful to waste one's time. They say I'm active. But being active is still wasting one's time, if in doing one loses oneself. Today is a resting time, and my heart goes off in search of itself.

If an anguish still clutches me, it's when I feel this impalpable moment slip through my fingers like quicksilver. Let those who wish to turn their backs upon the world. I have nothing to complain of, since I can see myself being born. At the moment, my whole kingdom is of this world. This sun and these shadows, this warmth and this cold rising from the depths of the air: why wonder if something is dying or if men suffer, since everything is written on this window where the sun sheds its plenty as a greeting to my pity?

I can say and in a moment I shall say that what counts is to be human and simple. No, what counts is to be true, and then everything fits in, humanity and simplicity. When am I truer than when I am the world? My cup brims over before I have time to desire. Eternity is there and I was hoping for it. What I wish for now is no longer happiness but simply awareness.

One man contemplates and another digs his grave: how can we separate them? Men and their absurdity? But here is the smile of the heavens. The light swells and soon it will be summer. But here are the eyes and voices of those I must love. I hold onto the world with every gesture, to men with all my gratitude and pity. I do not want to choose between the right and wrong sides of the world, and I do not like a choice to be made. People don't want one to be lucid and ironic.

They say: "It shows you're not nice." I can't see how this follows. Certainly, if I hear someone called an immoralist, my translation is that he needs to give himself an ethic; if I hear of another that he despises intelligence, I realize that he cannot bear his doubts. But this is because I don't like people to cheat. The great courage is still to gaze as squarely at the light as at death.

Besides, how can I define the link that leads from this all consuming love of life to this secret despair? If I listen to the voice of irony,¹ crouching underneath things, slowly it reveals itself. Winking its small, clear eye, it says: "Live as if ..." In spite of much searching, this is all I know. After all, I am not sure that I am right. But if I think of that woman whose story I heard, this is not what is important. She was going to die, and her daughter dressed her for the tomb while she was alive. Actually, it seems it's easier to do so before the limbs are stiff. Yet it's odd all the same to live among people who are in such a hurry.

1 That guarantee of freedom Barrès speaks of.

The end