

## Return To Tipasa, Albert Camus

### Return To Tipasa

You have navigated with raging soul far from the paternal home, passing beyond the sea's double rocks, and you now inhabit a foreign land.

—Medea

For five days rain had been falling ceaselessly on Algiers and had finally wet the sea itself. From an apparently inexhaustible sky, constant downpours, viscous in their density, streamed down upon the gulf. Gray and soft as a huge sponge, the sea rose slowly in the ill-defined bay.

But the surface of the water seemed almost motionless under the steady rain. Only now and then a barely perceptible swelling motion would raise above the sea's surface a vague puff of smoke that would come to dock in the harbor, under an arc of wet boulevards. The city itself, all its white walls dripping, gave off a different steam that went out to meet the first steam. Whichever way you turned, you seemed to be breathing water, to be drinking the air.

In front of the soaked sea I walked and waited in that December Algiers, which was for me the city of summers. I had fled Europe's night, the winter of faces. But the summer city herself had been emptied of her laughter and offered me only bent and shining backs. In the evening, in the crudely lighted cafes where I took refuge, I read my age in faces I recognized without being able to name them. I merely knew that they had been young with me and that they were no longer so.

Yet I persisted without very well knowing what I was waiting for, unless perhaps the moment to go back to Tipasa. To be sure, it is sheer madness, almost always punished, to return to the sites of one's youth and try to relive at forty what one loved or keenly enjoyed at twenty. But I was forewarned of that madness. Once already I had returned to Tipasa, soon after those war years that marked for me the end of youth.

I hoped, I think, to recapture there a freedom I could not forget. In that spot, indeed, more than twenty years ago, I had spent whole mornings wandering among the ruins, breathing in the wormwood, warming myself against the stones, discovering little roses, soon plucked of their petals, which outlive the spring. Only at noon, at the hour when the cicadas themselves fell silent as if overcome, I would flee the greedy glare of an all-consuming light. Sometimes at night I would sleep open-eyed under a sky dripping with stars.

I was alive then. Fifteen years later I found my ruins, a few feet from the first waves, I followed the streets of the forgotten walled city through fields covered with bitter trees, and on the slopes overlooking the hay I still caressed the bread-colored columns. But the ruins were now surrounded with barbed wire and could be entered only through certain openings. It was also forbidden, for reasons which it appears that morality approves, to walk there at night; by day one encountered an official guardian. It just happened, that morning, that it was raining over the whole extent of the ruins.

Disoriented, walking through the wet, solitary countryside, I tried at least to recapture that strength, hitherto always at hand, that helps me to accept what is when once I have admitted that I cannot change it. And I could not, indeed, reverse the course of time and restore to the world the appearance I had loved which had disappeared in a day, long before.

The second of September 1939, in fact, I had not gone to Greece, as I was to do. War, on the contrary, had come to us, then it had spread over Greece herself. That distance, those years separating the warm ruins from the barbed wire were to be found in me, too, that day as I stood before the sarcophaguses full of black water or under the sodden tamarisks.

Originally brought up surrounded by beauty which was my only wealth, I had begun in plenty. Then had come the barbed wire I mean tyrannies, war, police forces, the era of revolt. One had had to put oneself right with the authorities of night: the day's beauty was but a memory.

And in this muddy Tipasa the memory itself was becoming dim. It was indeed a question of beauty, plenty, or youth! In the light from conflagrations the world had suddenly shown its wrinkles and its wounds, old and new. It had aged all at once, and we with it. I had come here looking for a certain "lift"; but I realized that it inspires only the man who is unaware that he is about to launch forward.

No love without a little innocence. Where was the innocence? Empires were tumbling down; nations and men were tearing at one another's throats; our hands were soiled. Originally innocent without knowing it, we were now guilty without meaning to be: the mystery was increasing with our knowledge. This is why, O mockery, we were concerned with morality. Weak and disabled, I was dreaming of virtue!

In the days of innocence I didn't even know that morality existed. I knew it now, and I was not capable of living up to its standard. On the promontory that I used to love, among the wet columns of the ruined temple, I seemed to be walking behind someone whose steps I could still hear on the stone slabs and mosaics but whom I should never again overtake. I went back to Paris and remained several years before returning home.

Yet I obscurely missed something during all those years. When one has once had the good luck to love intensely, life is spent in trying to recapture that ardor and that illumination. Forsaking beauty and the sensual happiness attached to it, exclusively serving misfortune, calls for a nobility I lack. But, after all, nothing is true that forces one to exclude. Isolated beauty ends up simpering; solitary justice ends up oppressing. Whoever aims to serve one exclusive of the other serves no one, not even himself, and eventually serves injustice twice.

A day comes when, thanks to rigidity, nothing causes wonder any more, everything is known, and life is spent in beginning over again. These are the days of exile, of desiccated life, of dead souls. To come alive again, one needs a special grace, self-forgetfulness, or a homeland. Certain mornings, on turning a corner, a delightful dew falls on the heart and then evaporates. But its coolness remains, and this is what the heart requires always. I had to set out again.

And in Algiers a second time, still walking under the same downpour which seemed not to have ceased since a departure I had thought definitive, amid the same vast melancholy smelling of rain and sea, despite this misty sky, these backs fleeing under the shower, these cafes whose sulphureous light distorted faces, I persisted in hoping. Didn't I know, besides, that Algiers rains, despite their appearance of never meaning to end, nonetheless stop in an instant, like those streams in my country which rise in two hours, lay waste acres of land, and suddenly dry up? One evening, in fact, the rain ceased. I waited one night more.

A limpid morning rose, dazzling, over the pure sea. From the sky, fresh as a daisy, washed over and over again by the rains, reduced by these repeated washings to its finest and clearest texture, emanated a vibrant light that gave to each house and each tree a sharp outline, an astonished newness. In the world's morning the earth must have sprung forth in such a light. I again took the road for Tipasa.

For me there is not a single one of those sixty-nine kilometers that is not filled with memories and sensations. Turbulent childhood, adolescent daydreams in the drone of the bus's motor, mornings, unspoiled girls, beaches, young muscles always at the peak of their effort, evening's slight anxiety in a sixteen-year-old heart, lust for life, fame, and ever the same sky throughout

the years, unfailing in strength and light, itself insatiable, consuming one by one over a period of months the victims stretched out in the form of crosses on the beach at the deathlike hour of noon. Always the same sea, too, almost impalpable in the morning light, which I again saw on the horizon as soon as the road, leaving the Sahel and its bronze-colored vineyards, sloped down toward the coast. But I did not stop to look at it.

I wanted to see again the Chenoua, that solid, heavy mountain cut out of a single block of stone, which borders the bay of Tipasa to the west before dropping down into the sea itself. It is seen from a distance, long before arriving, a light, blue haze still confused with the sky. But gradually it is condensed, as you advance toward it, until it takes on the color of the surrounding waters, a huge motionless wave whose amazing leap upward has been brutally solidified above the sea calmed all at once. Still nearer, almost at the gates of Tipasa, here is its frowning bulk, brown and green, here is the old mossy god that nothing will ever shake, a refuge and harbor for its sons, of whom I am one.

While watching it I finally got through the barbed wire and found myself among the ruins. And under the glorious December light, as happens but once or twice in lives which ever after can consider themselves favored to the full, I found exactly what I had come seeking, what, despite the era and the world, was offered me, truly to me alone, in that forsaken nature. From the forum strewn with olives could be seen the village down below. No sound came from it; wisps of smoke rose in the limpid air. The sea likewise was silent as if smothered under the unbroken shower of dazzling, cold light.

From the Chenoua a distant cock's crow alone celebrated the day's fragile glory. In the direction of the ruins, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but pock-marked stones and wormwood, trees and perfect columns in the transparency of the crystalline air. It seemed as if the morning were stabilized, the sun stopped for an incalculable moment. In this light and this silence, years of wrath and night melted slowly away. I listened to an almost forgotten sound within myself as if my heart, long stopped, were calmly beginning to beat again.

And awake now, I recognized one by one the imperceptible sounds of which the silence was made up: the figured bass of the birds, the sea's faint, brief sighs at the foot of the rocks, the vibration of the trees, the blind singing of the columns, the rustling of the wormwood plants, the furtive lizards.

I heard that; I also listened to the happy torrents rising within me. It seemed to me that I had at last come to harbor, for a moment at least, and that henceforth that moment would be endless. But soon after, the sun rose visibly a degree in the sky. A magpie precluded briefly, and at once, from all directions, birds' songs burst out with energy, jubilation, joyful discordance, and infinite rapture. The day started up again. It was to carry me to evening.

At noon on the half-sandy slopes covered with heliotropes like a foam left by the furious waves of the last few days as they withdrew, I watched the sea barely swelling at that hour with an exhausted motion, and I satisfied the two thirsts one cannot long neglect without drying up—I mean loving and admiring. For there is merely bad luck in not being loved; there is misfortune in not loving.

All of us, today, are dying of this misfortune. For violence and hatred dry up the heart itself; the long fight for justice exhausts the love that nevertheless gave birth to it. In the clamor in which we live, love is impossible and justice does not suffice. This is why Europe hates daylight and is only able to set injustice up against injustice.

But in order to keep justice from shriveling up like a beautiful orange fruit containing nothing but a bitter, dry pulp, I discovered once more at Tipasa that one must keep intact in oneself a freshness, a cool wellspring of joy, love the

day that escapes injustice, and return to combat having won that light.

Here I recaptured the former beauty, a young sky, and I measured my luck, realizing at last that in the worst years of our madness the memory of that sky had never left me. This was what in the end had kept me from despairing. I had always known that the ruins of Tipasa were younger than our new constructions or our bomb damage. There the world began over again every day in an ever new light. O light! This is the cry of all the characters of ancient drama brought face to face with their fate. This last resort was ours, too, and I knew it now. In the middle of winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer.

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I have again left Tipasa; I have returned to Europe and its struggles. But the memory of that day still uplifts me and helps me to welcome equally what delights and what crushes. In the difficult hour we are living, what else can I desire than to exclude nothing and to learn how to braid with white thread and black thread a single cord stretched to the breaking-point? In everything I have done or said up to now, I seem to recognize these two forces, even when they work at cross-purposes.

I have not been able to disown the light into which I was born and yet I have not wanted to reject the servitudes of this time. It would be too easy to contrast here with the sweet name of Tipasa other more sonorous and crueler names. For men of today there is an inner way, which I know well from having taken it in both directions, leading from the spiritual hilltops to the capitals of crime. And doubtless one can always rest, fall asleep on the hilltop or board with crime.

But if one forgoes a part of what is, one must forgo being oneself; one must forgo living or loving otherwise than by proxy. There is thus a will to live without rejecting anything of life, which is the virtue I honor most in this world. From time to time, at least, it is true that I should like to have practiced it. Inasmuch as few epochs require as much as ours that one should be equal to the best as to the worst, I should like, indeed, to shirk nothing and to keep faithfully a double memory. Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking, I should like never to be unfaithful either to one or to the others.

But this still resembles a moral code, and we live for something that goes farther than morality. If we could only name it, what silence! On the hill of Sainte-Salsa, to the east of Tipasa, the evening is inhabited. It is still light, to tell the truth, but in this light an almost invisible fading announces the day's end. A wind rises, young like the night, and suddenly the waveless sea chooses a direction and flows like a great barren river from one end of the horizon to the other.

The sky darkens. Then begins the mystery, the gods of night, the beyond-pleasure. But how to translate this? The little coin I am carrying away from here has a visible surface, a woman's beautiful face which repeats to me all I have learned in this day, and a worn surface which I feel under my fingers during the return. What can that lipless mouth be saying, except what I am told by another mysterious voice, within me, which every day informs me of my ignorance and my happiness:

"The secret I am seeking lies hidden in a valley full of olive trees, under the grass and the cold violets, around an old house that smells of wood smoke. For more than twenty years I rambled over that valley and others resembling it, I questioned mute goatherds, I knocked at the door of deserted ruins. Occasionally, at the moment of the first star in the still bright sky, under a shower of shimmering light, I thought I knew. I did know, in truth. I still know, perhaps. But no one wants any of this secret; I don't want any myself, doubtless; and I cannot stand apart from my people.

I live in my family, which thinks it rules over rich and hideous cities built of stones and mists. Day and night it speaks up, and everything bows before it, which bows before nothing: it is deaf to all secrets. Its power that carries me bores me, nevertheless, and on occasion its shouts weary me. But its misfortune is mine, and we are of the same blood. A cripple, likewise, an accomplice and noisy, have I not shouted among the stones? Consequently, I strive to forget, I walk in our cities of iron and fire, I smile bravely at the night, I hail the storms, I shall be faithful. I have forgotten, in truth: active and deaf, henceforth. But perhaps someday, when we are ready to die of exhaustion and ignorance, I shall be able to disown our garish tombs and go and stretch out in the valley, under the same light, and learn for the last time what I know."

1952

The End