

Summer In Algiers, Albert Camus

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for JACQUES HEURGON

The loves we share with a city are often secret loves. Old walled towns like Paris, Prague, and even Florence are closed in on themselves and hence limit the world that belongs to them. But Algiers (together with certain other privileged places such as cities on the sea) opens to the sky like a mouth or a wound. In Algiers one loves the commonplaces: the sea at the end of every street, a certain volume of sunlight, the beauty of the race.

And, as always, in that unashamed offering there is a secret fragrance. In Paris it is possible to be homesick for space and a beating of wings. Here at least man is gratified in every wish and, sure of his desires, can at last measure his possessions.

Probably one has to live in Algiers for some time in order to realize how paralyzing an excess of nature's bounty can be. There is nothing here for whoever would learn, educate himself, or better himself. This country has no lessons to teach. It neither promises nor affords glimpses. It is satisfied to give, but in abundance. It is completely accessible to the eyes, and you know it the moment you enjoy it. Its pleasures are without remedy and its joys without hope.

Above all, it requires clairvoyant souls—that is, without solace. It insists upon one's performing an act of lucidity as one performs an act of faith. Strange country that gives the man it nourishes both his splendor and his misery! It is not surprising that the sensual riches granted to a sensitive man of these regions should coincide with the most extreme destitution. No truth fails to carry with it its bitterness. How can one be surprised, then, if I never feel more affection for the face of this country than amid its poorest men?

During their entire youth men find here a life in proportion to their beauty. Then, later on, the downhill slope and obscurity. They wagered on the flesh, but knowing they were to lose. In Algiers whoever is young and alive finds sanctuary and occasion for triumphs everywhere: in the bay, the sun, the red and white games on the seaward terraces, the flowers and sports stadiums, the cool-legged girls.

But for whoever has lost his youth there is nothing to cling to and nowhere where melancholy can escape itself. Elsewhere, Italian terraces, European cloisters, or the profile of the Provencal hills—all places where man can flee his humanity and gently liberate himself from himself. But everything here calls for solitude and the blood of young men. Goethe on his deathbed calls for light and this is a historic remark. At Belcourt and Bab-el-Oued old men seated in the depths of cafes listen to the bragging of young men with plastered hair.

Summer betrays these beginnings and ends to us in Algiers. During those months the city is deserted. But the poor remain, and the sky. We join the former as they go down toward the harbor and man's treasures: warmth of the water and the brown bodies of women. In the evening, sated with such wealth, they return to the oilcloth and kerosene lamp that constitute the whole setting of their life.

In Algiers no one says "go for a swim," but rather "indulge in a swim." The implications are clear. People swim in the harbor and go to rest on the buoys. Anyone who passes near a buoy where a pretty girl already is sunning herself shouts to his friends: "I tell you it's a seagull." These are healthy amusements. They must obviously constitute the ideal of those youths, since most of them continue the same life in the winter, undressing every day at noon for a frugal lunch in the sun. Not that they have read the boring sermons of the nudists, those Protestants of the flesh (there is a theory of the body quite as

tiresome as that of the mind).

But they are simply "comfortable in the sunlight." The importance of this custom for our epoch can never be overestimated. For the first time in two thousand years the body has appeared naked on beaches. For twenty centuries men have striven to give decency to Greek insolence and naivete, to diminish the flesh and complicate dress. Today, despite that history, young men running on Mediterranean beaches repeat the gestures of the athletes of Delos. And living thus among bodies and through one's body, one becomes aware that it has its connotations, its life, and, to risk nonsense, a psychology of its own.[1]

The body's evolution, like that of the mind, has its history, its vicissitudes, its progress, and its deficiency. With this distinction, however: color. When you frequent the beach in summer you become aware of a simultaneous progression of all skins from white to golden to tanned, ending up in a tobacco color which marks the extreme limit of the effort of transformation of which the body is capable.

Above the harbor stands the set of white cubes of the Kasbah. When you are at water level, against the sharp white background of the Arab town the bodies describe a copper-colored frieze. And as the month of August progresses and the sun grows, the white of the houses becomes more blinding and skins take on a darker warmth. How can one fail to participate, then, in that dialogue of stone and flesh in tune with the sun and seasons?

The whole morning has been spent in diving, in bursts of laughter amid splashing water, in vigorous paddles around the red and black freighters (those from Norway with all the scents of wood, those that come from Germany full of the smell of oil, those that go up and down the coast and smell of wine and old casks). At the hour when the sun overflows from every corner of the sky at once, the orange canoe loaded with brown bodies brings us home in a mad race. And when, having suddenly interrupted the cadenced beat of the double paddle's bright-colored wings, we glide slowly in the calm water of the inner harbor, how can I fail to feel that I am piloting through the smooth waters a savage cargo of gods in whom I recognize my brothers?

But at the other end of the city summer is already offering us, by way of contrast, its other riches: I mean its silence and its boredom. That silence is not always of the same quality, depending on whether it springs from the shade or the sunlight. There is the silence of noon on the Place du Gouvernement. In the shade of the trees surrounding it, Arabs sell for five sous glasses of iced lemonade flavored with orange-flowers. Their cry "Cool, cool" can be heard across the empty square.

After their cry silence again falls under the burning sun: in the vendor's jug the ice moves and I can hear its tinkle. There is the silence of the siesta. In the streets of the Marine, in front of the dirty barbershops it can be measured in the melodious buzzing of flies behind the hollow reed curtains. Elsewhere, in the Moorish cafes of the Kasbah the body is silent, unable to tear itself away, to leave the glass of tea and rediscover time with the pulsing of its own blood. But, above all, there is the silence of summer evenings.

Those brief moments when day topples into night must be peopled with secret signs and summons for my Algiers to be so closely linked to them. When I spend some time far from that town, I imagine its twilights as promises of happiness. On the hills above the city there are paths among the mastics and olive trees. And toward them my heart turns at such moments.

I see flights of black birds rise against the green horizon. In the sky suddenly divested of its sun something relaxes. A whole little nation of red clouds stretches out until it is absorbed in the air. Almost immediately afterward appears the first star that had been seen taking shape and consistency in the depth of the sky. And then suddenly, all consuming, night. What exceptional quality do the fugitive Algerian evenings possess to be able to release so many

things in me?

I haven't time to tire of that sweetness they leave on my lips before it has disappeared into night. Is this the secret of its persistence? This country's affection is overwhelming and furtive. But during the moment it is present, one's heart at least surrenders completely to it. At Padovani Beach the dance hall is open every day. And in that huge rectangular box with its entire side open to the sea, the poor young people of the neighborhood dance until evening.

Often I used to await there a moment of exceptional beauty. During the day the hall is protected by sloping wooden awnings. When the sun goes down they are raised. Then the hall is filled with an odd green light born of the double shell of the sky and the sea. When one is seated far from the windows, one sees only the sky and, silhouetted against it, the faces of the dancers passing in succession. Sometimes a waltz is being played, and against the green background the black profiles whirl obstinately like those cut-out silhouettes that are attached to a phonograph's turntable.

Night comes rapidly after this, and with it the lights. But I am unable to relate the thrill and secrecy that subtle instant holds for me. I recall at least a magnificent tall girl who had danced all afternoon. She was wearing a jasmine garland on her tight blue dress, wet with perspiration from the small of her back to her legs. She was laughing as she danced and throwing back her head. As she passed the tables, she left behind her a mingled scent of flowers and flesh.

When evening came, I could no longer see her body pressed tight to her partner, but against the sky whirled alternating spots of white jasmine and black hair, and when she would throw back her swelling breast I would hear her laugh and see her partner's profile suddenly plunge forward. I owe to such evenings the idea I have of innocence. In any case, I learn not to separate these creatures bursting with violent energy from the sky where their desires whirl.

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In the neighborhood movies in Algiers peppermint lozenges are sometimes sold with, stamped in red, all that is necessary to the awakening of love: (1) questions: "When will you marry me?" "Do you love me?" and (2) replies: "Madly," "Next spring." After having prepared the way, you pass them to your neighbor, who answers likewise or else turns a deaf ear. At Belcourt marriages have been arranged this way and whole lives been pledged by the mere exchange of peppermint lozenges. And this really depicts the childlike people of this region.

The distinguishing mark of youth is perhaps a magnificent vocation for facile joys. But, above all, it is a haste to live that borders on waste. At Belcourt, as at Bab-el-Oued, people get married young. They go to work early and in ten years exhaust the experience of a lifetime.

A thirty-year-old workman has already played all the cards in his hand. He awaits the end between his wife and his children. His joys have been sudden and merciless, as has been his life. One realizes that he is born of this country where everything is given to be taken away.

In that plenty and profusion life follows the sweep of great passions, sudden, exacting, and generous. It is not to be built up, but to be burned up. Stopping to think and becoming better are out of the question. The notion of hell, for instance, is merely a funny joke here. Such imaginings are allowed only to the very virtuous.

And I really think that virtue is a meaningless word in all Algeria. Not that these men lack principles. They have their code, and a very special one. You are not disrespectful to your mother. You see that your wife is respected in the street. You show consideration for a pregnant woman.

You don't double up on an adversary, because "that looks bad." Whoever does not observe these elementary commandments "is not a man," and the question is decided. This strikes me as fair and strong. There are still many of us who automatically observe this code of the street, the only disinterested one I know. But at the same time the shopkeeper's ethics are unknown. I have always seen faces around me filled with pity at the sight of a man between two policemen. And before knowing whether the man had stolen, killed his father, or was merely a nonconformist, they would say: "The poor fellow," or else, with a hint of admiration: "He's a pirate, all right."

There are races born for pride and life. They are the ones that nourish the strangest vocation for boredom. It is also among them that the attitude toward death is the most repulsive. Aside from sensual pleasure, the amusements of this race are among the silliest. A society of bowlers and association banquets, the three-franc movies and parish feasts have for years provided the recreation of those over thirty. Algiers Sundays are among the most sinister.

How, then, could this race devoid of spirituality clothe in myths the profound horror of its life? Everything related to death is either ridiculous or hateful here. This populace without religion and without idols dies alone after having lived in a crowd. I know no more hideous spot than the cemetery on Boulevard Bru, opposite one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world.

An accumulation of bad taste among the black fencings allows a dreadful melancholy to rise from this spot where death shows her true likeness. "Everything fades," say the heart-shaped ex-votos, "except memory." And all insist on that paltry eternity provided us cheaply by the hearts of those who loved us. The same words fit all despairs. Addressed to the dead man, they speak to him in the second person (our memory will never forsake you); lugubrious pretense which attributes a body and desires to what is at best a black liquid. Elsewhere, amid a deadly profusion of marble flowers and birds, this bold assertion: "Never will your grave be without flowers."

But never fear: the inscription surrounds a gilded stucco bouquet, very time-saving for the living (like those immortelles which owe their pompous name to the gratitude of those who still jump onto moving buses). Inasmuch as it is essential to keep up with the times, the classic warbler is sometimes replaced by an astounding pearl airplane piloted by a silly angel who, without regard for logic, is provided with an impressive pair of wings.

Yet how to bring out that these images of death are never separated from life? Here the values are closely linked. The favorite joke of Algerian undertakers, when driving an empty hearse, is to shout: "Want a ride, sister?" to any pretty girls they meet on the way. There is no objection to seeing a symbol in this, even if somewhat untoward. It may seem blasphemous, likewise, to reply to the announcement of a death while winking one's left eye: "Poor fellow, he'll never sing again," or, like that woman of Oran who had never loved her husband: "God gave him to me and God has taken him from me."

But, all in all, I see nothing sacred in death and am well aware, on the other hand, of the distance there is between fear and respect. Everything here suggests the horror of dying in a country that invites one to live. And yet it is under the very walls of this cemetery that the young of Belcourt have their assignations and that the girls offer themselves to kisses and caresses.

I am well aware that such a race cannot be accepted by all. Here intelligence has no place as in Italy. This race is indifferent to the mind. It has a cult for and admiration of the body. Whence its strength, its innocent cynicism, and a puerile vanity which explains why it is so severely judged. It is commonly blamed for its "mentality"—that is, a way of seeing and of living. And it is true that a certain intensity of life is inseparable from injustice.

Yet here is a race without past, without tradition, and yet not without poetry—

but a poetry whose quality I know well, harsh, carnal, far from tenderness, that of their very sky, the only one in truth to move me and bring me inner peace. The contrary of a civilized nation is a creative nation. I have the mad hope that, without knowing it perhaps, these barbarians lounging on beaches are actually modeling the image of a culture in which the greatness of man will at last find its true likeness.

This race, wholly cast into its present, lives without myths, without solace. It has put all its possessions on this earth and therefore remains without defense against death. All the gifts of physical beauty have been lavished on it. And with them, the strange avidity that always accompanies that wealth without future. Everything that is done here shows a horror of stability and a disregard for the future.

People are in haste to live, and if an art were to be born here it would obey that hatred of permanence that made the Dorians fashion their first column in wood. And yet, yes, one can find measure as well as excess in the violent and keen face of this race, in this summer sky with nothing tender in it, before which all truths can be uttered and on which no deceptive divinity has traced the signs of hope or of redemption. Between this sky and these faces turned toward it, nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic, or a religion, but stones, flesh, stars, and those truths the hand can touch.

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To feel one's attachment to a certain region, one's love for a certain group of men, to know that there is always a spot where one's heart will feel at peace these are many certainties for a single human life. And yet this is not enough. But at certain moments everything yearns for that spiritual home. "Yes, we must go back there—there, indeed." Is there anything odd in finding on earth that union that Plotinus longed for? Unity is expressed here in terms of sun and sea. The heart is sensitive to it through a certain savor of flesh which constitutes its bitterness and its grandeur. I learn that there is no superhuman happiness, no eternity outside the sweep of days. These paltry and essential belongings, these relative truths are the only ones to stir me. As for the others, the "ideal" truths, I have not enough soul to understand them. Not that one must be an animal, but I find no meaning in the happiness of angels.

I know simply that this sky will last longer than I. And what shall I call eternity except what will continue after my death? I am not expressing here the creature's satisfaction with his condition. It is quite a different matter. It is not always easy to be a man, still less to be a pure man. But being pure is recovering that spiritual home where one can feel the world's relationship, where one's pulse-beats coincide with the violent throbbing of the two-o'clock sun.

It is well known that one's native land is always recognized at the moment of losing it. For those who are too uneasy about themselves, their native land is the one that negates them. I should not like to be brutal or seem extravagant. But, after all, what negates me in this life is first of all what kills me. Everything that exalts life at the same time increases its absurdity. In the Algerian summer I learn that one thing only is more tragic than suffering, and that is the life of a happy man. But it may be also the way to a greater life because it leads to not cheating.

Many, in fact, feign love of life to evade love itself. They try their skill at enjoyment and at "indulging in experiences." But this is illusory. It requires a rare vocation to be a sensualist. The life of a man is fulfilled without the aid of his mind, with its backward and forward movements, at one and the same time its solitude and its presences. To see these men of Belcourt working, protecting their wives and children, and often without a reproach, I think one can feel a secret shame. To be sure, I have no illusions about it. There is not much love in the lives I am speaking of. I ought to say that not much remains. But at least they have evaded nothing. There are words I have never really understood,

such as "sin." Yet I believe these men have never sinned against life.

For if there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life. These men have not cheated. Gods of summer they were at twenty by their enthusiasm for life, and they still are, deprived of all hope. I have seen two of them die. They were full of horror, but silent. It is better thus. From Pandora's box, where all the ills of humanity swarmed, the Greeks drew out hope after all the others, as the most dreadful of all. I know no more stirring symbol; for, contrary to the general belief, hope equals resignation.

And to live is not to resign oneself. This, at least, is the bitter lesson of Algerian summers. But already the season is wavering and summer totters. The first September rains, after such violence and hardening, are like the liberated earth's first tears, as if for a few days this country tried its hand at tenderness. Yet at the same period the carob trees cover all of Algeria with a scent of love. In the evening or after the rain, the whole earth, its womb moist with a seed redolent of bitter almond, rests after having given herself to the sun all summer long. And again that scent hallows the union of man and earth and awakens in us the only really virile love in this world: ephemeral and noble.

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Note

[1] May I take the ridiculous position of saying that I do not like the way Gide exalts the body? He asks it to restrain its desire to make it keener. Thus he comes dangerously near to those who in brothel slang are called involved or brain-workers. Christianity also wants to suspend desire. But, more natural, it sees a mortification in this. My friend Vincent, who is a cooper and junior breast-stroke champion, has an even clearer view. He drinks when he is thirsty, if he desires a woman tries to go to bed with her, and would marry her if he loved her (this hasn't yet happened). Afterward he always says: "I feel better"—and this sums up vigorously any apology that might be made for satiety.

The End