

Summer (L'Eté) Albert Camus

Summer (L'Eté) 1954

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But you, you were born for a limpid day.  
Hölderlin

WHILE the essays in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and *Nuptials* were all written and published within a relatively short time, and express attitudes closely connected with a particular period in Camus's life, those included in *L'Eté* in 1954 cover a much wider period. As his own note to page 109 indicates, he began writing *Le Minotaur ou la Halte d'Oran* as early as 1939, although the essay was not finally published until February 1946, when it appeared in the thirteenth number of the review *L'Arche*.

It was subsequently published by Charlot, in Algiers, and was made available to the general reading public in France only in 1954. In contrast, the first brief notes for *The Sea Close By* were written in October 1949 (see *Carnets II*, Gallimard; 1964, p. 290; Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 228), and the essay itself was published in a review in 1954.

Oran was a town that Camus knew very well. In the first volume of his *Carnets*, he refers to two visits that he made there in 1939, and it was the birthplace of his second wife, Francine Faure, whom he married in 1940. *La Peste* is set in Oran, and the insistence upon the ordinary, down-to-earth, and commercial atmosphere of the city is an important theme in the novel. —P.T.

I, The Minotaur, or Stopping in Oran

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The Minotaur, or Stopping in Oran to Pierre Galindo

This essay dates from 1939—something the reader should bear in mind in judging what Oran might be like today. Violent protests emanating from this beautiful town have in fact assured me that all the imperfections have been (or will be) remedied. The beauties celebrated in this essay, have, on the other hand, been jealously protected. Oran, a happy and realistic city, no longer needs writers. It is waiting for tourists. (1953)

THERE are no more deserts. There are no more islands. Yet one still feels the need of them. To understand this world, one must sometimes turn away from it; to serve men better, one must briefly hold them at a distance. But where can the

necessary solitude be found, the long breathing space in which the mind gathers its strength and takes stock of its courage? There are still the great cities. But they must meet certain conditions.

The cities Europe offers are too full of murmurs from the past. A practiced ear can still detect the rustling of wings, the quivering of souls. We feel the dizziness of the centuries, of glory and revolutions. We are reminded of the clamor in which Europe was forged. There is not enough silence. Paris is often a desert for the heart, but sometimes, from the height of Père-Lachaise, a wind of revolution suddenly fills this desert with flags and vanquished grandeurs. The same is true of certain Spanish towns, of Florence or Prague. Salzburg would be peaceful without Mozart. But now and then the great cry of Don Juan plunging into hell runs across the Salzach.

Vienna seems more silent, a maiden among cities. Its stones are no more than three centuries old, and their youth has known no sadness. But Vienna stands at a crossroads of history. The clash of empires echoes around her. On certain evenings when the sky clothes itself in blood, the stone horses on the monuments of the Ring seem about to take flight. In this fleeting instant, when everything speaks of power and history, you can distinctly hear the Ottoman empire crashing under the charge of the Polish cavalry. Here, too, there is not enough silence.

It is certainly this well-populated solitude that men look for in the cities of Europe. At least, men who know what they want. Here, they can choose their company, take it and leave it. How many minds have been tempered in the walk between a hotel room and the old stones of the Ile Saint-Louis! It is true that others died of loneliness. But it was here, in any case, that those who survived found reasons to grow and for self-affirmation. They were alone and yet not alone. Centuries of history and beauty, the burning evidence of a thousand past lives, accompanied them along the Seine and spoke to them both of traditions and of conquests.

But their youth urged them to call forth this company. There comes a time, there come times in history, when such company is a nuisance. "It's between the two of us now," cries Rastignac as he confronts the vast mustiness of Paris. Yes, but two can also be too many! Deserts themselves have taken on a meaning; poetry has handicapped them. They have become the sacred places for all the world's suffering. What the heart requires at certain moments is just the opposite, a place without poetry. Descartes, for his meditations, chose as his desert the busiest commercial city of his time. There he found his solitude, and the chance to write what is perhaps the greatest of our virile poems: "The first (precept) was never to accept anything as true unless I knew without the slightest doubt that it was so." One can have less ambition and yet the same longing. But for the last three centuries Amsterdam has been covered with museums. To escape from poetry and rediscover the peacefulness of stones we need other deserts, and other places without soul or resources. Oran is one of these.

## Chapter I, The Street

I have often heard the people of Oran complain: "There is no interesting circle." No, indeed! You wouldn't want one! A few right-thinking people tried to introduce the customs of another world into this desert, faithful to the principle that it is impossible to advance art or ideas without grouping together.[1] The result is such that the only instructive circles remain those of poker-players, boxing enthusiasts, bowlers, and the local associations. There at least the unsophisticated prevails. After all, there exists a certain nobility that does not lend itself to the lofty. It is sterile by nature. And those who want to find it leave the "circles" and go out into the street.

The streets of Oran are doomed to dust, pebbles, and heat. If it rains, there is a deluge and a sea of mud. But rain or shine, the shops have the same extravagant and absurd look. All the bad taste of Europe and the Orient has managed to converge in them. One finds, helter-skelter, marble greyhounds, ballerinas with swans, versions of Diana the huntress in green galalith, discus-

throwers and reapers, everything that is used for birthday and wedding gifts, the whole race of painful figurines constantly called forth by a commercial and playful genie on our mantelpieces. But such perseverance in bad taste takes on a baroque aspect that makes one forgive all.

Here, presented in a casket of dust, are the contents of a show window: frightful plaster models of deformed feet, a group of Rembrandt drawings "sacrificed at 150 francs each," practical jokes, tricolored wallets, an eighteenth-century pastel, a mechanical donkey made of plush, bottles of Provence water for preserving green olives, and a wretched wooden virgin with an indecent smile. (So that no one can go away ignorant, the "management" has propped at its base a card saying: "Wooden Virgin.") There can be found in Oran:

1) Cafes with filter-glazed counters sprinkled with the legs and wings of flies, the proprietor always smiling despite his always empty cafe. A small black coffee used to cost twelve sous and a large one eighteen.

2) Photographers' studios where there has been no progress in technique since the invention of sensitized paper. They exhibit a strange fauna impossible to encounter in the streets, from the pseudo-sailor leaning on a console table to the marriageable girl, badly dressed and arms dangling, standing in front of a sylvan background. It is possible to assume that these are not portraits from life: they are creations.

3) An edifying abundance of funeral establishments. It is not that people die more in Oran than elsewhere, but I fancy merely that more is made of it.

The attractive naivete of this nation of merchants is displayed even in their advertising. I read, in the handbill of an Oran movie theater, the advertisement for a third-rate film. I note the adjectives "sumptuous," splendid, extraordinary, amazing, staggering, and "tremendous." At the end the management informs the public of the considerable sacrifices it has undertaken to be able to present this startling "realization." Nevertheless, the price of tickets will not be increased.

It would be wrong to assume that this is merely a manifestation of that love of exaggeration characteristic of the south. Rather, the authors of this marvelous handbill are revealing their sense of psychology. It is essential to overcome the indifference and profound apathy felt in this country the moment there is any question of choosing between two shows, two careers, and, often, even two women. People make up their minds only when forced to do so. And advertising is well aware of this. It will assume American proportions, having the same reasons, both here and there, for getting desperate.

The streets of Oran inform us as to the two essential pleasures of the local youth: getting one's shoes shined and displaying those same shoes on the boulevard. In order to have a clear idea of the first of these delights, one has to entrust one's shoes, at ten o'clock on a Sunday morning, to the shoe-shiners in Boulevard Gal-lieni. Perched on high armchairs, one can enjoy that peculiar satisfaction produced, even upon a rank outsider, by the sight of men in love with their job, as the shoe-shiners of Oran obviously are. Everything is worked over in detail. Several brushes, three kinds of cloths, the polish mixed with gasoline.

One might think the operation is finished when a perfect shine comes to life under the soft brush. But the same insistent hand covers the glossy surface again with polish, rubs it, dulls it, makes the cream penetrate the heart of the leather, and then brings forth, under the same brush, a double and really definitive gloss sprung from the depths of the leather. The wonders achieved in this way are then exhibited to the connoisseurs. In order to appreciate such pleasures of the boulevard, you ought to see the masquerade of youth taking place every evening on the main arteries of the city.

Between the ages of sixteen and twenty the young people of Oran "Society" borrow

their models of elegance from American films and put on their fancy dress before going out to dinner. With wavy, oiled hair protruding from under a felt hat slanted over the left ear and peaked over the right eye, the neck encircled by a collar big enough to accommodate the straggling hair, the microscopic knot of the necktie kept in place by a regulation pin, with thigh-length coat and waist close to the hips, with light-colored and noticeably short trousers, with dazzlingly shiny triple-soled shoes, every evening those youths make the sidewalks ring with their metal-tipped soles. In all things they are bent on imitating the bearing, forthrightness, and superiority of Mr. Clark Gable. For this reason the local carpers commonly nickname those youths, by favor of a casual pronunciation, "Clarques."

At any rate, the main boulevards of Oran are invaded late in the afternoon by an army of attractive adolescents who go to the greatest trouble to look like a bad lot. Inasmuch as the girls of Oran feel traditionally engaged to these softhearted gangsters, they likewise flaunt the make-up and elegance of popular American actresses. Consequently, the same wits call them "Marlenes." Thus on the evening boulevards when the sound of birds rises skyward from the palm trees, dozens of Clarques and Marlenes meet, eye and size up one another, happy to be alive and to cut a figure, indulging for an hour in the intoxication of perfect existences.

There can then be witnessed, the jealous say, the meetings of the American Commission. But in these words lies the bitterness of those over thirty who have no connection with such diversions. They fail to appreciate those daily congresses of youth and romance. These are, in truth, the parliaments of birds that are met in Hindu literature. But no one on the boulevards of Oran debates the problem of being or worries about the way to perfection. There remains nothing but flappings of wings, plumed struttings, coquettish and victorious graces, a great burst of carefree song that disappears with the night.

From here I can hear Klestakov: "I shall soon have to be concerned with something lofty." Alas, he is quite capable of it! If he were urged, he would people this desert within a few years. But for the moment a somewhat secret soul must liberate itself in this facile city with its parade of painted girls unable, nevertheless, to simulate emotion, feigning coyness so badly that the pretense is immediately obvious.

Be concerned with something lofty! Just see: Santa-Cruz cut out of the rock, the mountains, the flat sea, the violent wind and the sun, the great cranes of the harbor, the trains, the hangars, the quays, and the huge ramps climbing up the city's rock, and in the city itself these diversions and this boredom, this hubbub and this solitude. Perhaps, indeed, all this is not sufficiently lofty. But the great value of such overpopulated islands is that in them the heart strips bare. Silence is no longer possible except in noisy cities.

From Amsterdam Descartes writes to the aged Guez de Balzac: "I go out walking every day amid the confusion of a great crowd, with as much freedom and tranquillity as you could do on your garden paths." [2]

## Chapter II, The Desert in Oran

Obliged to live facing a wonderful landscape, the people of Oran have overcome this fearful ordeal by covering their city with very ugly constructions. One expects to find a city open to the sea, washed and refreshed by the evening breeze. And aside from the Spanish quarter, [3] one finds a walled town that turns its back to the sea, that has been built up by turning back on itself like a snail. Oran is a great circular yellow wall covered over with a leaden sky.

In the beginning you wander in the labyrinth, seeking the sea like the sign of Ariadne. But you turn round and round in pale and oppressive streets, and eventually the Minotaur devours the people of Oran: the Minotaur is boredom. For some time the citizens of Oran have given up wandering. They have accepted being eaten.

It is impossible to know what stone is without coming to Oran. In that dustiest of cities, the pebble is king. It is so much appreciated that shopkeepers exhibit it in their show windows to hold papers in place or even for mere display. Piles of them are set up along the streets, doubtless for the eyes' delight, since a year later the pile is still there. Whatever elsewhere derives its poetry from the vegetable kingdom here takes on a stone face.

The hundred or so trees that can be found in the business section have been carefully covered with dust. They are petrified plants whose branches give off an acrid, dusty smell. In Algiers the Arab cemeteries have a well-known mellowness. In Oran, above the Ras-el-Ain ravine, facing the sea this time, flat against the blue sky, are fields of chalky, friable pebbles in which the sun blinds with its fires. Amid these bare bones of the earth a purple geranium, from time to time, contributes its life and fresh blood to the landscape.

The whole city has solidified in a stony matrix. Seen from Les Planteurs, the depth of the cliffs surrounding it is so great that the landscape becomes unreal, so mineral it is. Man is outlawed from it. So much heavy beauty seems to come from another world.

If the desert can be defined as a soulless place where the sky alone is king, then Oran is awaiting her prophets. All around and above the city the brutal nature of Africa is indeed clad in her burning charms. She bursts the unfortunate stage setting with which she is covered; she shrieks forth between all the houses and over all the roofs. If one climbs one of the roads up the mountain of Santa-Cruz, the first thing to be visible is the scattered colored cubes of Oran.

But a little higher and already the jagged cliffs that surround the plateau crouch in the sea like red beasts. Still a little higher and a great vortex of sun and wind sweeps over, airs out, and obscures the untidy city scattered in disorder all over a rocky landscape. The opposition here is between magnificent human anarchy and the permanence of an unchanging sea.

This is enough to make a staggering scent of life rise toward the mountainside road.

There is something implacable about the desert. The mineral sky of Oran, her streets and trees in their coating of dust— everything contributes to creating this dense and impassible universe in which the heart and mind are never distracted from themselves, nor from their sole object, which is man. I am speaking here of difficult places of retreat. Books are written on Florence or Athens.

Those cities have formed so many European minds that they must have a meaning. They have the means of moving to tears or of uplifting. They quiet a certain spiritual hunger whose bread is memory. But can one be moved by a city where nothing attracts the mind, where the very ugliness is anonymous, where the past is reduced to nothing? Emptiness, boredom, an indifferent sky, what are the charms of such places? Doubtless solitude and, perhaps, the human creature.

For a certain race of men, wherever the human creature is beautiful is a bitter native land. Oran is one of its thousand capitals.

### Chapter III, Sports

The Central Sporting Club, on rue du Fondouk in Oran, is giving an evening of boxing which it insists will be appreciated by real enthusiasts. Interpreted, this means that the boxers on the bill are far from being stars, that some of them are entering the ring for the first time, and that consequently you can count, if not on the skill, at least on the courage of the opponents. A native having thrilled me with the firm promise that "blood would flow," I find myself that evening among the real enthusiasts.

Apparently the latter never insist on comfort. To be sure, a ring has been set up at the back of a sort of whitewashed garage, covered with corrugated iron and violently lighted. Folding chairs have been lined up in a square around the ropes. These are the "honor rings." Most of the length of the hall has been filled with seats, and behind them opens a large free space called "lounge" by reason of the fact that not one of the five hundred persons in it could take out a handkerchief without causing serious accidents.

In this rectangular box live and breathe some thousand men and two or three women—the kind who, according to my neighbor, always insist on "attracting attention." Everybody is sweating fiercely. While waiting for the fights of the "young hopefuls" a gigantic phonograph grinds out a Tino Rossi record. This is the sentimental song before the murder.

The patience of a true enthusiast is unlimited. The fight announced for nine o'clock has not even begun at nine thirty and no one has protested. The spring weather is warm and the smell of a humanity in shirt sleeves is exciting. Lively discussion goes on among the periodic explosions of lemon-soda corks and the tireless lament of the Corsican singer. A few late arrivals are wedged into the audience when a spotlight throws a blinding light onto the ring. The fights of the young hopefuls begin.

The young hopefuls, or beginners, who are fighting for the fun of it, are always eager to prove this by massacring each other at the earliest opportunity, in defiance of technique. They were never able to last more than three rounds. The hero of the evening in this regard is young "Kid Airplane," who in regular life sells lottery tickets on cafe terraces. His opponent, indeed, hurtled awkwardly out of the ring at the beginning of the second round after contact with a fist wielded like a propeller.

The crowd got somewhat excited, but this is still an act of courtesy. Gravely it breathes in the hallowed air of the embrocation. It watches these series of slow rites and unregulated sacrifices, made even more authentic by the propitiatory designs, on the white wall, of the fighters' shadows. These are the deliberate ceremonial prologues of a savage religion. The trance will not come until later.

And it so happens that the loudspeaker announces Amar, "the tough Oranese who has never disarmed," against Perez, "the slugger from Algiers." An uninitiate would misinterpret the yelling that greets the introduction of the boxers in the ring. He would imagine some sensational combat in which the boxers were to settle a personal quarrel known to the public. To tell the truth, it is a quarrel they are going to settle. But it is the one that for the past hundred years has mortally separated Algiers and Oran. Back in history, these two North African cities would have already bled each other white as Pisa and Florence did in happier times.

Their rivalry is all the stronger just because it probably has no basis. Having every reason to like each other, they loathe each other proportionately. The Oranese accuse the citizens of Algiers of "sham." The people of Algiers imply that the Oranese are rustic. These are bloodier insults than they might seem because they are metaphysical. And unable to lay siege to each other, Oran and Algiers meet, compete, and insult each other on the field of sports, statistics, and public works.

Thus a page of history is unfolding in the ring. And the tough Oranese, backed by a thousand yelling voices, is defending against Perez a way of life and the pride of a province. Truth forces me to admit that Amar is not conducting his discussion well. His

argument has a flaw: he lacks reach. The slugger from Algiers, on the contrary, has the required reach in his argument. It lands persuasively between his contradictor's eyes. The Oranese bleeds magnificently amid the vociferations of a wild audience. Despite the repeated encouragements of the gallery and of my neighbor, despite the dauntless shouts of "Kill him!", "Floor him!", the

insidious "Below the belt,"

"Oh, the referee missed that one!", the optimistic "He's pooped," "He can't take any more," nevertheless the man from Algiers is proclaimed the winner on points amid interminable catcalls. My neighbor, who is inclined to talk of sportsmanship, applauds ostensibly, while slipping to me in a voice made faint by so many shouts: "So that he won't be able to say back there that we of Oran are savages."

But throughout the audience, fights not included on the program have already broken out. Chairs are brandished, the police clear a path, excitement is at its height. In order to calm these good people and contribute to the return of silence, the "management," without losing a moment, commissions the loudspeaker to boom out "Sambre-et-Meuse." For a few minutes the audience has a really warlike look. Confused clusters of combatants and voluntary referees sway in the grip of policemen; the gallery exults and calls for the rest of the program with wild cries, cock-a-doodle-doo's, and mocking catcalls drowned in the irresistible flood from the military band.

But the announcement of the big fight is enough to restore calm. This takes place suddenly, without flourishes, just as actors leave the stage once the play is finished. With the greatest unconcern, hats are dusted off, chairs are put back in place, and without transition all faces assume the kindly expression of the respectable member of the audience who has paid for his ticket to a family concert.

The last fight pits a French champion of the Navy against an Oran boxer. This time the difference in reach is to the advantage of the latter. But his superiorities, during the first rounds, do not stir the crowd. They are sleeping off the effects of their first excitement; they are sobering up.

They are still short of breath. If they applaud, there is no passion in it. They hiss without animosity. The audience is divided into two camps, as is appropriate in the interest of fairness. But each individual's choice obeys that indifference that follows on great expenditures of energy.

If the Frenchman holds his own, if the Oranese forgets that one doesn't lead with the head, the boxer is bent under a volley of hisses, but immediately pulled upright again by a burst of applause. Not until the seventh round does sport rise to the surface again, at the same time that the real enthusiasts begin to emerge from their fatigue. The Frenchman, to tell the truth, has touched the mat and, eager to win back points, has hurled himself on his opponent.

"What did I tell you?" said my neighbor; "it's going to be a fight to the finish." Indeed, it is a fight to the finish. Covered with sweat under the pitiless light, both boxers open their guard, close their eyes as they hit, shove with shoulders and knees, swap their blood, and snort with rage. As one man, the audience has stood up and punctuates the efforts of its two heroes.

It receives the blows, returns them, echoes them in a thousand hollow, panting voices. The same ones who had chosen their favorite in indifference cling to their choice through obstinacy and defend it passionately. Every ten seconds a shout from my neighbor pierces my right ear: "Go to it, gob; come on, Navy!" while another man in front of us shouts to the Oranese: "Anda! hombre!"

The man and the gob go to it, and together with them, in this temple of whitewash, iron, and cement, an audience completely given over to gods with cauliflower ears. Every blow that gives a dull sound on the shining pectorals echoes in vast vibrations in the very body of the crowd, which, with the boxers, is making its last effort.

In such an atmosphere a draw is badly received. Indeed, it runs counter to a quite Manichean tendency in the audience. There is good and there is evil, the

winner and the loser. One must be either right or wrong. The conclusion of this impeccable logic is immediately provided by two thousand energetic lungs accusing the judges of being sold, or bought. But the gob has walked over and embraced his rival in the ring, drinking in his fraternal sweat. This is enough to make the audience, reversing its view, burst out in sudden applause. My neighbor is right: they are not savages.

The crowd pouring out, under a sky full of silence and stars, has just fought the most exhausting fight. It keeps quiet and disappears furtively, without any energy left for post mortems. There is good and there is evil; that religion is merciless. The band of faithful is now no more than a group of black-and-white shadows disappearing into the night. For force and violence are solitary gods. They contribute nothing to memory. On the contrary, they distribute their miracles by the handful in the present.

They are made for this race without past which celebrates its communions around the prize ring. These are rather difficult rites but ones that simplify everything. Good and evil, winner and loser. At Corinth two temples stood side by side, the temple of Violence and the temple of Necessity.

#### Chapter IV, Monuments

For many reasons due as much to economics as to metaphysics, it may be said that the Oranese style, if there is one, forcefully and clearly appears in the extraordinary edifice called the Maison du Colon. Oran hardly lacks monuments. The city has its quota of imperial marshals, ministers, and local benefactors. They are found on dusty little squares, resigned to rain and sun, they too converted to stone and boredom. But, in any case, they represent contributions from the outside. In that happy barbarity they are the regrettable marks of civilization.

Oran, on the other hand, has raised up her altars and rostra to her own honor.

In the very heart of the mercantile city, having to construct a common home for the innumerable agricultural organizations that keep this country alive, the people of Oran conceived the idea of building solidly a convincing image of their virtues: the Maison du Colon. To judge from the edifice, those virtues are three in number: boldness in taste, love of violence, and a feeling for historical syntheses.

Egypt, Byzantium, and Munich collaborated in the delicate construction of a piece of pastry in the shape of a bowl upside down. Multicolored stones, most vigorous in effect, have been brought in to outline the roof. These mosaics are so exuberantly persuasive that at first you see nothing but an amorphous effulgence. But with a closer view and your attention called to it, you discover that they have a meaning: a graceful colonist, wearing a bow tie and white pith helmet, is receiving the homage of a procession of slaves dressed in classical style.[4] The edifice and its colored illustrations have been set down in the middle of a square in the to-and-fro of the little two-car trams whose filth is one of the charms of the city.

Oran greatly cherishes also the two lions of its Place d'Armes, or parade ground. Since 1888 they have been sitting in state on opposite sides of the municipal stairs. Their author was named ( ain. They have majesty and a stubby torso. It is said that at night they get down from their pedestal one after the other, silently pace around the dark square, and on occasion uninate at length under the big, dusty ficus trees. These, of course, are rumors to which the people of Oran lend an indulgent ear. But it is unlikely.

Despite a certain amount of research, I have not been able to get interested in Cain. I merely learned that he had the reputation of being a skillful animal-sculptor. Yet I often think of him. This is an intellectual bent that comes naturally in Oran. Here is a sonorously named artist who left an unimportant work here. Several hundred thousand people are familiar with the easygoing beasts he put in front of a pretentious town hall.



This is one way of succeeding in art. To be sure, these two lions, like thousands of works of the same type, are proof of something else than talent. Others have created "The Night Watch," "Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata," "David," or the Pharsalian bas-relief called "The Glorification of the Flower." Cain, on the other hand, set up two hilarious snouts on the square of a mercantile province overseas. But the David will go down one day with Florence and the lions will perhaps be saved from the catastrophe. Let me repeat, they are proof of something else.

Can one state this idea clearly? In this work there are insignificance and solidity. Spirit counts for nothing and matter for a great deal. Mediocrity insists upon lasting by all means, including bronze. It is refused a right to eternity, and every day it takes that right. Is it not eternity itself? In any event, such perseverance is capable of stirring, and it involves its lesson, that of all the monuments of Oran, and of Oran herself.

An hour a day, every so often, it forces you to pay attention to something that has no importance. The mind profits from such recurrences. In a sense this is its hygiene, and since it absolutely needs its moments of humility, it seems to me that this chance to indulge in stupidity is better than others. Everything that is ephemeral wants to last. Let us say that everything wants to last. Human productions mean nothing else, and in this regard Cain's lions have the same chances as the ruins of Angkor. This disposes one toward modesty.

There are other Oranese monuments. Or at least they deserve this name because they, too, stand for their city, and perhaps in a more significant way. They are the public works at present covering the coast for some ten kilometers. Apparently it is a matter of transforming the most luminous of bays into a gigantic harbor. In reality it is one more chance for man to come to grips with stone.

In the paintings of certain Flemish masters a theme of strikingly general application recurs insistently: the building of the Tower of Babel. Vast landscapes, rocks climbing up to heaven, steep slopes teeming with workmen, animals, ladders, strange machines, cords, pulleys. Man, moreover, is there only to give scale to the inhuman scope of the construction. This is what the Oran coast makes one think of, west of the city.

Clinging to vast slopes, rails, dump-cars, cranes, tiny trains ... Under a broiling sun, toy-like locomotives round huge blocks of stone amid whistles, dust, and smoke. Day and night a nation of ants bustles about on the smoking carcass of the mountain. Clinging all up and down a single cord against the side of the cliff, dozens of men, their bellies pushing against the handles of automatic drills, vibrate in empty space all day long and break off whole masses of rock that hurtle down in dust and rumbling.

Farther on, dump-carts tip their loads over the slopes; and the rocks, suddenly poured seaward, bound and roll into the water, each large lump followed by a scattering of lighter stones. At regular intervals, at dead of night or in broad daylight, detonations shake the whole mountain and stir up the sea itself.

Man, in this vast construction field, makes a frontal attack on stone. And if one could forget, for a moment at least, the harsh slavery that makes this work possible, one would have to admire. These stones, torn from the mountain, serve man in his plans. They pile up under the first waves, gradually emerge, and finally take their place to form a jetty, soon covered with men and machines which advance, day after day, toward the open sea.

Without stopping, huge steel jaws bite into the cliff's belly, turn round, and disgorge into the water their overflowing gravel. As the coastal cliff is lowered, the whole coast encroaches irresistibly on the sea.

Of course, destroying stone is not possible. It is merely moved from one place

to another. In any case, it will last longer than the men who use it. For the moment, it satisfies their will to action. That in itself is probably useless. But moving things about is the work of men; one must choose doing that or nothing.[5] Obviously the people of Oran have chosen.

In front of that indifferent bay, for many years more they will pile up stones along the coast. In a hundred years—tomorrow, in other words—they will have to begin again. But today these heaps of rocks testify for the men in masks of dust and sweat who move about among them. The true monuments of Oran are still her stones.

#### Chapter V, Ariadne's Stone

It seems that the people of Oran are like that friend of Flaubert who, on the point of death, casting a last glance at this irreplaceable earth, exclaimed: "Close the window; it's too beautiful." They have closed the window, they have walled themselves in, they have cast out the landscape. But Flaubert's friend, Le Poittevin, died, and after him days continued to be added to days.

Likewise, beyond the yellow walls of Oran, land and sea continue their indifferent dialogue. That permanence in the world has always had contrary charms for man. It drives him to despair and excites him. The world never says but one thing; first it interests, then it bores.

But eventually it wins out by dint of obstinacy. It is always right. Already, at the very gates of Oran, nature raises its voice. In the direction of Canastel there are vast wastelands covered with fragrant brush. There sun and wind speak only of solitude. Above Oran there is the mountain of Santa-Cruz, the plateau and the myriad ravines leading to it. Roads, once carriageable, cling to the slopes overhanging the sea. In the month of January some are covered with flowers. Daisies and buttercups turn them into sumptuous paths, embroidered in yellow and white.

About Sant-Cruzz everything has been said. But if I were to speak of it, I should forget the sacred processions that climb the rugged hill on feast days, in order to recall other pilgrimages. Solitary, they walk in the red stone, rise above the motionless bay, and come to dedicate to nakedness a luminous, perfect hour.

Oran has also its deserts of sand: its beaches. Those encountered near the gates are deserted only in winter and spring. Then they are plateaus covered with asphodels, peopled with bare little cottages among the flowers. The sea rumbles a bit, down below. Yet already the sun, the faint breeze, the whiteness of the asphodels, the sharp blue of the sky, everything makes one fancy summer—the golden youth then covering the beach, the long hours on the sand and the sudden softness of evening.

Each year on these shores there is a new harvest of girls in flower. Apparently they have but one season. The following year, other cordial blossoms take their place, which, the summer before, were still little girls with bodies as hard as buds. At eleven a.m., coming down from the plateau, all that young flesh, lightly clothed in motley materials, breaks on the sand like a multicolored wave.

One has to go farther (strangely close, however, to that spot where two hundred thousand men are laboring) to discover a still virgin landscape: long, deserted dunes where the passage of men has left no other trace than a worm-eaten hut. From time to time an Arab shepherd drives along the top of the dunes the black and beige spots of his flock of goats. On the beaches of the Oran country every summer morning seems to be the first in the world. Each twilight seems to be the last, solemn agony, announced at sunset by a final glow that darkens every hue.

The sea is ultramarine, the road the color of clotted blood, the beach yellow. Everything disappears with the green sun; an hour later the dunes are bathed in

moonlight. Then there are incomparable nights under a rain of stars. Occasionally storms sweep over them, and the lightning flashes flow along the dunes, whiten the sky, and give the sand and one's eyes orange-colored glints.

But this cannot be shared. One has to have lived it. So much solitude and nobility give these places an unforgettable aspect. In the warm moment before daybreak, after confronting the first bitter, black waves, a new creature breasts night's heavy, enveloping water.

The memory of those joys does not make me regret them, and thus I recognize that they were good. After so many years they still last, somewhere in this heart which finds unswerving loyalty so difficult. And I know that today, if I were to go to the deserted dune, the same sky would pour down on me its cargo of breezes and stars. These are lands of innocence.

But innocence needs sand and stones. And man has forgotten how to live among them. At least it seems so, for he has taken refuge in this extraordinary city where boredom sleeps. Nevertheless, that very confrontation constitutes the value of Oran.

The capital of boredom, besieged by innocence and beauty, it is surrounded by an army in which every stone is a soldier. In the city, and at certain hours, however, what a temptation to go over to the enemy! What a temptation to identify oneself with those stones, to melt into that burning and impassive universe that defies history and its ferments!

That is doubtless futile. But there is in every man a profound instinct which is neither that of destruction nor that of creation. It is merely a matter of resembling nothing. In the shadow of the warm walls of Oran, on its dusty asphalt, that invitation is sometimes heard.

It seems that, for a time, the minds that yield to it are never disappointed. This is the darkness of Eurydice and the sleep of Isis. Here are the deserts where thought will collect itself, the cool hand of evening on a troubled heart. On this Mount of Olives, vigil is futile; the mind recalls and approves the sleeping Apostles. Were they really wrong? They nonetheless had their revelation.

Just think of Sakyamuni in the desert. He remained there for years on end, squatting motionless with his eyes on heaven. The very gods envied him that wisdom and that stone-like destiny. In his outstretched hands the swallows had made their nest. But one day they flew away, answering the call of distant lands. And he who had stifled in himself desire and will, fame and suffering, began to cry. It happens thus that flowers grow on rocks. Yes, let us accept stone when it is necessary.

That secret and that rapture we ask of faces can also be given us by stone. To be sure, this cannot last. But what can last, after all? The secret of faces fades away, and there we are, cast back to the chain of desires. And if stone can do no more for us than the human heart, at least it can do just as much.

"Oh, to be nothing!" For thousands of years this great cry has roused millions of men to revolt against desire and pain. Its dying echoes have reached this far, across centuries and oceans, to the oldest sea in the world. They still reverberate dully against the compact cliffs of Oran. Everybody in this country follows this advice without knowing it. Of course, it is almost futile. Nothingness cannot be achieved any more than the absolute can.

But since we receive as favors the eternal signs brought us by roses or by human suffering, let us not refuse either the rare invitations to sleep that the earth addresses us. Each has as much truth as the other.

This, perhaps, is the Ariadne's thread of this somnambulist and frantic city. Here one learns the virtues, provisional to be sure, of a certain kind of

boredom. In order to be spared, one must say "yes" to the Minotaur. This is an old and fecund wisdom. Above the sea, silent at the base of the red cliffs, it is enough to maintain a delicate equilibrium halfway between the two massive headlands which, on the right and left, dip into the clear water.

In the puffing of a coast-guard vessel crawling along the water far out bathed in radiant light, is distinctly heard the muffled call of inhuman and glittering forces: it is the Minotaur's farewell.

It is noon; the very day is being weighed in the balance. His rite accomplished, the traveler receives the reward of his liberation: the little stone, dry and smooth as an asphodel, that he picks up on the cliff. For the initiate the world is no heavier to bear than this stone. Atlas's task is easy; it is sufficient to choose one's hour. Then one realizes that for an hour, a month, a year, these shores can indulge in freedom.

They welcome pell-mell, without even looking at them, the monk, the civil servant, or the conqueror. There are days when I expected to meet, in the streets of Oran, Descartes or Cesare Borgia. That did not happen. But perhaps another will be more fortunate. A great deed, a great work, virile meditation used to call for the solitude of sands or of the convent. There were kept the spiritual vigils of arms. Where could they be better celebrated now than in the emptiness of a big city established for some time in unintellectual beauty?

Here is the little stone, smooth as an asphodel. It is at the beginning of everything. Flowers, tears (if you insist), departures, and struggles are for tomorrow. In the middle of the day when the sky opens its fountains of light in the vast, sonorous space, all the headlands of the coast look like a fleet about to set out. Those heavy galleons of rock and light are trembling on their keels as if they were preparing to steer for sunlit isles.

O mornings in the country of Oran! From the high plateaus the swallows plunge into huge troughs where the air is seething. The whole coast is ready for departure; a shiver of adventure ripples through it. Tomorrow, perhaps, we shall leave together.

1939

Note

[1] Gogol's Klestakov is met in Oran. He yawns and then: "I feel I shall soon have to be concerned with something lofty."

[2] Doubtless in memory of these good words, an Oran lecture-and-discussion group has been founded under the name of Cogito-Club.

[3] And the new boulevard called Front-de-Mer.

[4] Another quality of the Algerian race is, as you see, candor.

[5] This essay deals with a certain temptation. It is essential to have known it. One can then act or not, but with full knowledge of the facts.

## II, The Almond Trees

"Do you know," Napoleon once said to Fontanes, "what astounds me most about the world? The impotence of force to establish anything. There are only two powers in the world: the sword and the mind. In the end, the sword is always conquered by the mind."<sup>1</sup>

Conquerors, you see, are sometimes melancholy. They have to pay some price for so much vainglory. But what a hundred years ago was true of the sword is no longer true today of the tank. Conquerors have made progress, and the dismal silence of places without intelligence has been established for years at a time

in a lacerated Europe. At the time of the hideous wars of Flanders, Dutch painters could still perhaps paint the cockerels in their farmyards.

The Hundred Years War has likewise been forgotten, and yet the prayers of Silesian mystics still linger in some hearts. But today, things have changed; the painter and the monk have been drafted we are one with the world. The mind has lost that regal certainty which a conqueror could acknowledge; it exhausts itself now in cursing force, for want of knowing how to master it.

Some noble souls keep on deploring this, saying it is evil. We do not know if it is evil, but we know it is a fact. The conclusion is that we must come to terms with it. All we need know, then, is what we want. And what we want precisely is never again to bow beneath the sword, never again to count force as being in the right unless it is serving the mind. The task is endless, it's true. But we are here to pursue it. I do not have enough faith in reason to subscribe to a belief in progress or to any philosophy of history. I do believe at least that man's awareness of his destiny has never ceased to advance.

We have not overcome our condition, and yet we know it better. We know that we live in contradiction, but we also know that we must refuse this contradiction and do what is needed to reduce it. Our task as men is to find the few principles that will calm the infinite anguish of free souls. We must mend what has been torn apart, make justice imaginable again in a world so obviously unjust, give happiness a meaning once more to peoples poisoned by the misery of the century. Naturally, it is a superhuman task. But superhuman is the term for tasks men take a long time to accomplish, that's all.

Let us know our aims then, holding fast to the mind, even if force puts on a thoughtful or a comfortable face in order to seduce us. The first thing is not to despair. Let us not listen too much to those who proclaim that the world is at an end. Civilizations do not die so easily, and even if our world were to collapse, it would not have been the first. It is indeed true that we live in tragic times. But too many people confuse tragedy with despair. "Tragedy," Lawrence said, "ought to be a great kick at misery."<sup>2</sup> This is a healthy and immediately applicable thought. There are many things today deserving such a kick.

When I lived in Algiers, I would wait patiently all winter because I knew that in the course of one night, one cold, pure February night, the almond trees of the Vallée des Consuls would be covered with white flowers. I would marvel then at the sight of this fragile snow resisting the rains and the wind from the sea. Yet every year it lasted just long enough to prepare the fruit.

There is no symbol here. We will not win our happiness with symbols. We'll need something more solid. I mean only that sometimes, when life weighs too heavily today in a Europe still full of misery, I turn toward those shining lands where so much strength is still intact. I know them too well not to realize that they are the chosen land where courage and contemplation can live in harmony. Thinking of them teaches me that if we are to save the mind we must ignore its gloomy virtues and celebrate its strength and wonder.

Our world is poisoned by its misery, and seems to wallow in it. It has utterly surrendered to that evil which Nietzsche called the spirit of heaviness. Let us not add to this. It is futile to weep over the mind, it is enough to labor for it.

But where are the conquering virtues of the mind? The same Nietzsche listed them as mortal enemies to heaviness of the spirit. For him, they are strength of character, taste, the "world," classical happiness, severe pride, the cold frugality of the wise. More than ever, these virtues are necessary today, and each of us can choose the one that suits him best. Before the vastness of the undertaking, let no one forget strength of character. I don't mean the theatrical kind on political platforms, complete with frowns and threatening gestures.

But the kind that through the virtue of its purity and its sap, stands up to all the winds that blow in from the sea. Such is the strength of character that in the winter of the world will prepare the fruit.

1940

1 Camus first noted down the remark by Napoleon in his *Carnets* in 1939, and sketched out a description of the almond trees later the same year. (See *Carnets* I, pp. 186, 196; Alfred A. Knopf edition, pp. 156, 165-6.)

2 The quotation from D. H. Lawrence is taken from a letter written to A. W. McLeod on October 6, 1912: "I hate Bennett's resignation. Tragedy ought to be like a great kick at misfortune." Camus first noted it down in *Carnets* I, p. 183, in 1939; Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 153. A first version of this text appeared in *La Tunisie Française* on January 25, 1941. -P.T.

### III, Prometheus in the Underworld<sup>1</sup>

I felt the Gods were lacking as long as there was nothing to oppose them.  
Lucian, *Prometheus in the Caucasus*

What does Prometheus mean to man today? One could doubtless claim this God-defying rebel as the model of contemporary man and his protest thousands of years ago in the deserts of Scythia as culminating in the unparalleled historical convulsion of our day. But, at the same time, something suggests that this victim of persecution is still among us and that we are still deaf to the great cry of human revolt of which he gives the solitary signal.

Modern man indeed endures a multitude of suffering on the narrow surface of this earth; for the man deprived of food and warmth, liberty is merely a luxury that can wait; all he can do is suffer a little more, as if it were only a question of letting liberty and its last witnesses vanish a bit more. Prometheus was the hero who loved men enough to give them fire and liberty, technology and art. Today, mankind needs and cares only for technology. We rebel through our machines, holding art and what art implies as an obstacle and a symbol of slavery.

But what characterizes Prometheus is that he cannot separate machines from art. He believes that both souls and bodies can be freed at the same time. Man today believes that we must first of all free the body, even if the mind must suffer temporary death. But can the mind die temporarily?

Indeed, if Prometheus were to reappear, modern man would treat him as the gods did long ago: they would nail him to a rock, in the name of the very humanism he was the first to symbolize. The hostile voices to insult the defeated victim would be the very ones that echo on the threshold of Aeschylean tragedy: those of Force and Violence.

Am I yielding to the meanness of our times, to naked trees and the winter of the world? But this very nostalgia for light is my justification: it speaks to me of another world, of my true homeland. Does this nostalgia still mean something to some men? The year the war began, I was to board a ship and follow the voyage of Ulysses. At that time, even a young man without money could entertain the extravagant notion of crossing the sea in quest of sunlight. But I did what everyone else did at the time.

I did not get on that ship. I took my place in the queue shuffling toward the open mouth of hell. Little by little, we entered. At the first cry of murdered

innocence, the door slammed shut behind us.

We were in hell, and we have not left it since. For six long years we have been trying to come to terms with it. Now we glimpse the warm ghosts of fortunate islands only at the end of long, cold, sunless years that lie ahead.

How then, in this damp, dark Europe, can we avoid hearing with a quiver of regret and difficult complicity the cry the aged Chateaubriand uttered to Ampère departing for Greece: "You won't find a leaf from the olive trees or a single grape left of the ones I saw in Attica. I even miss the grass that grew there in my day. I haven't had the strength to make a patch of heather grow."<sup>2</sup>

And we too, for all our youthful blood, sunk as we are in the terrible old age of this last century, sometimes miss the grass that has always grown, the olive leaf that we'll no longer go to look at just to see it, and the grapes of liberty.

Man is everywhere, and everywhere we find his cries, his suffering, and his threats. With so many men gathered together, there is no room for grasshoppers. History is a sterile earth where heather does not grow. Yet men today have chosen history, and they neither could nor should turn away from it. But instead of mastering it, they agree a little more each day to be its slave.

Thus they betray Prometheus, this son "both bold in thought and light of heart." This is how they revert to the wretchedness of the men Prometheus tried to save. "They saw without seeing, heard without listening, like figures in a dream."

Yes, one evening in Provence, one perfect hill, one whiff of salt are enough to show us that everything still lies before us. We need to invent fire once more, to settle down once again to the job of appeasing the body's hunger. Attica, liberty, and its grape-gathering, the bread of the soul, must come later. What can we do about this but cry to ourselves: "They will never exist any more, or they will exist for others," and do what must be done so that others at least do not go begging?

We who feel this so painfully, and yet who try to accept it without bitterness, are we lagging behind, or are we forging ahead, and will we have the strength to make the heather grow again?

We can imagine how Prometheus would have replied to this question that rises from our century. Indeed, he has already given his answer: "I promise you, O mortals, both improvement and repair, if you are skillful, virtuous and strong enough to achieve them with your own hands."

If, then, it is true that salvation lies in our own hands, I will answer Yes to the question of the century, because of the thoughtful strength and the intelligent courage I still feel in some of the people I know. "O Justice, O my mother," cries Prometheus, "you see what I am made to suffer." And Hermes mocks the hero: "I am amazed that, being a God, you did not foresee the torment you are suffering." "I did see it," replies the rebel.

The men I've mentioned are also the sons of justice. They, too, suffer from the misery of all men, knowing what they do. They know all too well that blind justice does not exist, that history has no eyes, and that we must therefore reject its justice in order to replace it as much as possible with the justice conceived by the mind. This is how Prometheus returns in our century.

Myths have no life of their own. They wait for us to give them flesh. If one man in the world answers their call, they give us their strength in all its fullness. We must preserve this myth, and ensure that its slumber is not mortal so that its resurrection is possible. I sometimes doubt whether men can be saved today. But it is still possible to save their children, both body and mind. It is possible to offer them at the same time the chance for happiness and beauty.

If we must resign ourselves to living without beauty, and the freedom that is a part of beauty, the myth of Prometheus is one of those that will remind us that any mutilation of man can only be temporary, and that one serves nothing in man if one does not serve the whole man.

If he is hungry for bread and heather, and if it is true that bread is the more necessary, let us learn how to keep the memory of heather alive. At the darkest heart of history, Promethean men, without flinching from their difficult calling, will keep watch over the earth and the tireless grass. In the thunder and lightning of the gods, the chained hero keeps his quiet faith in man. This is how he is harder than his rock and more patient than his vulture.

His long stubbornness has more meaning for us than his revolt against the gods. Along with his admirable determination to separate and exclude nothing, which always has and always will reconcile mankind's suffering with the springtimes of the world.

1946

1 This essay was first published in 1947 by Palimugre, in Paris.

2 Camus first noted down this quotation from Chateaubriand in July 1945. See Carnets II, p. 136; Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 104. —P.T.

#### IV, A Short Guide to Towns Without a Past

The softness of Algiers is rather Italian. The cruel glare of Oran has something Spanish about it. Constantine, perched high on a rock above the Rummel Gorges, is reminiscent of Toledo. But Spain and Italy overflow with memories, with works of art and exemplary ruins. Toledo has had its El Greco and its Barrès. The cities I speak of, on the other hand, are towns without a past. Thus they are without tenderness or abandon. During the boredom of the siesta hours, their sadness is implacable and has no melancholy.

In the morning light, or in the natural luxury of the evenings, their delights are equally ungentle. These towns give nothing to the mind and everything to the passions. They are suited neither to wisdom nor to the delicacies of taste. A Barrès or anyone like him would be completely pulverized.

Travelers with a passion for other people's passions, oversensitive souls, aesthetes, and newlyweds have nothing to gain from going to Algiers. And, unless he had a divine call, a man would be ill-advised to retire and live there forever. Sometimes, in Paris, when people I respect ask me about Algeria, I feel like crying out: "Don't go there." Such joking has some truth in it. For I can see what they are expecting and know they will not find it.

And, at the same time, I know the attractions and the subtle power of this country, its insinuating hold on those who linger, how it immobilizes them first by ridding them of questions and finally by lulling them to sleep with its everyday life. At first the revelation of the light, so glaring that everything turns black and white, is almost suffocating. One gives way to it, settles down in it, and then realizes that this protracted splendor gives nothing to the soul and is merely an excessive delight.

Then one would like to return to the mind. But the men of this country—and this is their strength—seem to have more heart than mind. They can be your friends (and what friends!), but you can never tell them your secrets.

This might be considered dangerous here in Paris, where souls are poured out so extravagantly and where the water of secrets flows softly and endlessly along



among the fountains, the statues, and the gardens.

This land most resembles Spain. With no traditions Spain would be merely a beautiful desert. And unless one happens to have been born there, there is only one race of men who can dream of withdrawing forever to the desert. Having been born in this desert, I can hardly think of describing it as a visitor.

Can one catalogue the charms of a woman one loves dearly? No, one loves her all of a piece, if I may use the expression, with one or two precise reasons for tenderness, like a favorite pout or a particular way of shaking the head. Such is my long standing liaison with Algeria, one that will doubtless never end and that keeps me from being completely lucid.

All anyone can do in such a case is to persevere and make a kind of abstract list of what he loves in the thing he loves. This is the kind of academic exercise I can attempt here on the subject of Algeria. First there is the beauty of the young people. The Arabs, of course, and then the others. The French of Algeria are a bastard race, made up of unexpected mixtures.

Spaniards and Alsatians, Italians, Maltese, Jews, and Greeks have met here. As in America, such raw intermingling has had happy results. As you walk through Algiers, look at the wrists of the women and the young men, and then think of the ones you see in the Paris métro.

The traveler who is still young will also notice that the women are beautiful. The best place in Algiers to appreciate this is the terrace of the Café des Facultés, in the rue Michelet, on a Sunday morning in April. Groups of young women in sandals and light, brightly colored dresses walk up and down the street. You can admire them without inhibitions: that is what they come for. The Cintra bar, on the boulevard Galliéni in Oran, is also a good observatory. In Constantine, you can always stroll around the bandstand.

But since the sea is several hundred kilometers away, there is something missing in the people you meet there. In general, and because of this geographical location, Constantine offers fewer attractions, although the quality of its ennui is rather more delicate.

If the traveler arrives in summer, the first thing to do, obviously, is to go down to the beaches surrounding the towns. He will see the same young people, more dazzling because less clothed. The sun gives them the somnolent eyes of great beasts. In this respect, the beaches of Oran are the finest, for both nature and women are wilder there. As for the picturesque, Algiers offers an Arab town, Oran a Negro village and a Spanish district, and Constantine a Jewish quarter.

Algiers has a long necklace of boulevards along the sea; you must walk there at night. Oran has few trees, but the most beautiful stone in the world. Constantine has a suspension bridge where the thing to do is have your photograph taken. On very windy days, the bridge sways to and fro above the deep gorges of the Rummel, and you have the feeling of danger.

I recommend that the sensitive traveler, if he goes to Algiers, drink anisette under the archways around the harbor, go to La Pêcherie in the morning and eat freshly caught fish grilled on charcoal stoves; listen to Arab music in a little café on the rue de la Lyre whose name I've forgotten; sit on the ground, at six in the evening, at the foot of the statue of the due d'Orléans, in Government Square (not for the sake of the duke, but because there are people walking by, and it's pleasant there); have lunch at Padovani's, which is a kind of dance hall on stilts along the seashore, where the life is always easy; visit the Arab cemeteries, first to find calm and beauty there, then to appreciate at their true value the ignoble cities where we stack our dead; go and smoke a cigarette in the Casbah on the rue de Bouchers, in the midst of spleens, fivers, lungs, and intestines that drip blood on everything (the cigarette is necessary, these medieval practices have a strong smell).

As to the rest, you must be able to speak ill of Algiers when in Oran (insist on the commercial superiority of Oran's harbor), make fun of Oran when in Algiers (don't hesitate to accept the notion that Oranians "don't know how to live"), and, at every opportunity, humbly acknowledge the surpassing merit of Algiers in comparison to metropolitan France. Once these concessions have been made, you will be able to appreciate the real superiority of the Algerian over the Frenchman—that is to say, his limitless generosity and his natural hospitality.

And now perhaps I can stop being ironic. After all, the best way to speak of what one loves is to speak of it lightly. When Algeria is concerned, I am always afraid to pluck the inner cord it touches in me, whose blind and serious song I know so well. But at least I can say that it is my true country, and that anywhere in the world I recognize its sons and my brothers by the friendly laughter that fills me at the sight of them. Yes, what I love about the cities of Algeria is not separate from their inhabitants.

That is why I like it best there in the evening when the shops and offices pour into the still, dim streets a chattering crowd that runs right up to the boulevards facing the sea and starts to grow silent there, as night falls and the lights from the sky, from the lighthouses in the bay, and from the streetlamps merge together little by little into a single flickering glow. A whole people stands meditating on the seashore then, a thousand solitudes springing up from the crowd. Then the vast African nights begin, the royal exile, and the celebration of despair that awaits the solitary traveler.

No, you must certainly not go there if you have a lukewarm heart or if your soul is weak and weary! But for those who know what it is to be torn between yes and no, between noon and midnight, between revolt and love, and for those who love funeral pyres along the shore, a flame lies waiting in Algeria.

1947

#### V, Helen's Exile<sup>1</sup>

The Mediterranean has a solar tragedy that has nothing to do with mists. There are evenings, at the foot of mountains by the sea, when night falls on the perfect curve of a little bay and an anguished fullness rises from the silent waters. Such moments make one realize that if the Greeks knew despair, they experienced it always through beauty and its oppressive quality.

In this golden sadness, tragedy reaches its highest point. But the despair of our world—quite the opposite—has fed on ugliness and upheavals. That is why Europe would be ignoble if suffering ever could be.

We have exiled beauty; the Greeks took arms for it. A basic difference but one that goes far back. Greek thought was always based on the idea of limits. Nothing was carried to extremes, neither religion nor reason, because Greek thought denied nothing, neither reason nor religion. It gave everything its share, balancing light with shade.

But the Europe we know, eager for the conquest of totality, is the daughter of excess. We deny beauty, as we deny everything that we do not extol. And, even though we do it in diverse ways, we extol one thing and one alone: a future world in which reason will reign supreme. In our madness, we push back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down upon us to destroy. Nemesis, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance, is watching. She chastises, ruthlessly, all those who go beyond the limit.

The Greeks, who spent centuries asking themselves what was just, would understand nothing of our idea of justice. Equity, for them, supposed a limit,

while our whole continent is convulsed by the quest for a justice we see as absolute. At the dawn of Greek thought, Heraclitus already conceived justice as setting limits even upon the physical universe itself: "The sun will not go beyond its bounds, for otherwise the Furies who watch over justice will find it out."

We, who have thrown both universe and mind out of orbit, find such threats amusing. In a drunken sky we ignite the suns that suit us. But limits nonetheless exist and we know it. In our wildest madness we dream of an equilibrium we have lost, and which in our simplicity we think we shall discover once again when our errors cease—an infantile presumption, which justifies the fact that childish peoples, inheriting our madness, are managing our history today.

A fragment attributed to the same Heraclitus states simply: "Presumption, regression of progress." And centuries after the Ephesian, Socrates, threatened by the death penalty, granted himself no superiority other than this: he did not presume to know what he did not know. The most exemplary life and thought of these centuries ends with a proud acknowledgment of ignorance. In forgetting this we have forgotten our virility. We have preferred the power that apes greatness—Alexander first of all, and then the Roman conquerors, whom our school history books, in an incomparable vulgarity of soul, teach us to admire. We have conquered in our turn, have set aside the bounds, mastered heaven and earth. Our reason has swept everything away.

Alone at last, we build our empire upon a desert. How then could we conceive that higher balance in which nature balanced history, beauty, and goodness, and which brought the music of numbers even into the tragedy of blood? We turn our back on nature, we are ashamed of beauty. Our miserable tragedies have the smell of an office, and their blood is the color of dirty ink. That is why it is indecent to proclaim today that we are the sons of Greece. Or, if we are, we are sons turned renegade. Putting history on the throne of God, we are marching toward theocracy, like those the Greeks called barbarians, whom they fought to the death in the waters of Salamis.

If we really want to grasp the difference, we must look to the one man among our philosophers who is the true rival of Plato. "Only the modern city" Hegel dares to write, "offers the mind the grounds on which it can achieve awareness of itself." We live in the time of great cities. The world has been deliberately cut off from what gives it permanence: nature, the sea, hills, evening meditations. There is no consciousness any more except in the streets because there is history only in the streets, so runs the decree.

And, consequently, our most significant works demonstrate the same prejudice. One looks in vain for landscapes in the major European writers since Dostoevski. History explains neither the natural universe which came before it, nor beauty which stands above it. Consequently it has chosen to ignore them. Whereas Plato incorporated everything nonsense, reason, and myths our philosophers admit nothing but nonsense or reason, because they have closed their eyes to the rest. The mole is meditating. It was Christianity that began to replace the contemplation of the world with the tragedy of the soul. But Christianity at least referred to a spiritual nature, and therefore maintained a certain fixity.

Now that God is dead, all that remains are history and power. For a long time now, the whole effort of our philosophers has been solely to replace the idea of human nature with the idea of situation and ancient harmony with the disorderly outbursts of chance or the pitiless movement of reason. While the Greeks used reason to restrain the will, we have ended by placing the impulse of the will at the heart of reason, and reason has therefore become murderous. For the Greeks, values existed a priori and marked out the exact limits of every action.

Modern philosophy places its values at the completion of action. They are not, but they become, and we shall know them completely only at the end of history. When they disappear, limits vanish as well, and since ideas differ as to what

these values will be, since there is no struggle which, unhindered by these same values, does not extend indefinitely, we are now witnessing the Messianic forces confronting one another, their clamors merging in the shock of empires. Excess is a fire, according to Heraclitus. The fire is gaining ground; Nietzsche has been overtaken.

It is no longer with hammer blows but with cannon shots that Europe philosophizes. Nature is still there, nevertheless. Her calm skies and her reason oppose the folly of men. Until the atom too bursts into flame, and history ends in the triumph of reason and the death agony of the species. But the Greeks never said that the limit could not be crossed. They said it existed and that the man who dared ignore it was mercilessly struck down. Nothing in today's history can contradict them.

Both the historical mind and the artist seek to remake the world. But the artist, through an obligation of his very nature, recognizes limits the historical mind ignores. This is why the latter aims at tyranny while the passion of the artist is liberty. All those who struggle today for liberty are in the final analysis fighting for beauty.

Of course, no one thinks of defending beauty solely for its own sake. Beauty cannot do without man, and we shall give our time its greatness and serenity only by sharing in its misery. We shall never again stand alone. But it is equally true that man cannot do without beauty, and this is what our time seems to want to forget.

We tense ourselves to achieve empires and the absolute, seek to transfigure the world before having exhausted it, to set it to rights before having understood it. Whatever we may say, we are turning our backs on this world. Ulysses, on Calypso's island, is given the choice between immortality and the land of his fathers. He chooses this earth, and death with it. Such simple greatness is foreign to our minds today.

Others will say that we lack humility, but the word, all things considered, is ambiguous. Like Dostoevski's buffoons who boast of everything, rise up to the stars and end by flaunting their shame in the first public place, we simply lack the pride of the man who is faithful to his limitations—that is, the clairvoyant love of his human condition. "I hate my time," wrote Saint-Exupéry before his death, for reasons that are not far removed from those I have mentioned.

But, however overwhelming his cry may be, coming from someone who loved men for their admirable qualities, we shall not take it as our own. Yet what a temptation, at certain times, to turn our backs on this gaunt and gloomy world. But this is our time and we cannot live hating ourselves.

It has fallen so low as much from the excess of its virtues as from the greatness of its faults. We shall fight for the one among its virtues that has ancient roots. Which virtue? Patroclus's horses weep for their master, dead in battle.

All is lost. But Achilles takes up the battle and victory comes at the end because friendship has been murdered: friendship is a virtue. It is by acknowledging our ignorance, refusing to be fanatics, recognizing the world's limits and man's, through the faces of those we love, in short, by means of beauty—this is how we may rejoin the Greeks. In a way, the meaning of tomorrow's history is not what people think.

It is in the struggle between creation and the inquisition. Whatever the price artists will have to pay for their empty hands, we can hope for their victory. Once again, the philosophy of darkness will dissolve above the dazzling sea. Oh, noonday thought, the Trojan war is fought far from the battleground! Once again, the terrible walls of the modern city will fall, to deliver Helen's beauty, "its soul serene as the untroubled waves."

1948

1 This text, written in August 1948 and originally dedicated to the poet René Char, one of Camus's close personal friends, first appeared in the Cahiers du Sud in 1948. The ideas that it expresses form the basis for many of the political and philosophical arguments developed in L'Homme révolté (The Rebel) in 1951. —P.T.

## VI, The Enigma<sup>1</sup>

Waves of sunlight, pouring from the topmost sky, bounce fiercely on the countryside around us. Everything grows quiet beneath its force, and Mount Luberon, over there, is merely a vast block of silence that I listen to unceasingly. I listen carefully, someone is running toward me in the distance, invisible friends call to me, my joy grows, just as years ago.

Once again, a happy enigma helps me to understand everything. Where is the absurdity of the world? Is it this resplendent glow or the memory of its absence? With so much sun in my memory, how could I have wagered on nonsense? People around me are amazed; so am I, at times. I could tell them, as I tell myself, that it was in fact the sun that helped me, and that the very thickness of its light coagulates the universe and its forms into a dazzling darkness.

But there are other ways of saying this, and I should like, faced with the white and black clarity that, for me, has always been the sign of truth, to explain in simple terms what I feel about this absurdity which I know too well to allow anyone to hold forth on it without making certain nuances.

The very fact of talking about it, after all, will lead us back to the sun. No man can say what he is. But sometimes he can say what he is not. Everyone wants the man who is still searching to have already reached his conclusions. A thousand voices are already telling him what he has found, and yet he knows that he hasn't found anything. Should he search on and let them talk? Of course. But, from time to time, one must defend himself. I do not know what I am looking for, cautiously I give it a name, I withdraw what I said, I repeat myself, I go backward and forward. Yet people insist I identify my term or terms, once and for all. Then I object; when things have a label aren't they lost already? Here, at least, is what I can try to say.

If I am to believe one of my friends, a man always has two characters: his own, and the one his wife thinks he has. Substitute society for wife and we shall understand how a particular expression, used by a writer to describe a whole context of emotions, can be isolated by the way people comment on it and laid before its author every time he tries to talk about something else. Words are like actions: "Are you the father of this child?" "Yes." "Then he is your son." "It is not as simple as that, not at all!" Thus Gerard de Nerval, one filthy night, hanged himself twice, once for himself because he was unhappy, and a second time for his legend, which now helps some people to live. No one can write about real unhappiness, or about certain moments of happiness, and I shall not try to do so here.

But, as far as legends are concerned, we can describe them, and, for a moment at least, believe that we have dispelled them. A writer writes to a great extent to be read (let's admire those who say they don't, but not believe them). Yet more and more, in France, he writes in order to obtain that final consecration which consists of not being read. In fact, from the moment he can provide the material for a feature article in the popular press, there is every possibility that he will be known to a fairly large number of people who will never read his works because they will be content to know his name and to read what other people write about him. From that point on he will be known (and forgotten) not for

what he is, but according to the image a hurried journalist has given of him.

To make a name in literature, therefore, it is no longer indispensable to write books. It is enough to be thought of as having written one which the evening papers will have mentioned and which one can fall back on for the rest of one's life.

There is no doubt that such a reputation, great or small, will be undeserved. But what can be done about it? Let us rather admit that the inconvenience may also be beneficial. Doctors know that certain illnesses are desirable: they compensate, in some way, for a functional disorder which, without them, might express itself in some more serious disturbance. Thus there are fortunate constipations and providential attacks of arthritis.

The flood of words and hasty judgments, which nowadays drowns all public activity in an ocean of frivolity, at least endows the French writer with a modesty he constantly needs in a nation that, furthermore, gives a disproportionate importance to his calling. To see one's name in two or three newspapers I could mention is so harsh a trial that it must inevitably involve some spiritual benefit.

Praise be, then, to a society that teaches us so cheaply, every day, by its very homage, that the greatness it honors is worthless. The louder its noise, the quicker it dies. It evokes the flaxen fires Alexander VI often had burned before him to remind him that the glory of this world vanishes like smoke.

But let's leave irony aside. It is enough to say that an artist must resign himself good humoredly and allow what he knows is an undeserved image of himself to lie about in dentists' waiting rooms and at the hairdresser's. I know a fashionable writer who, according to such sources, supposedly spent every night presiding over Bacchanalian orgies, where nymphs were clothed in nothing but their hair and fauns had gloomy fingernails.

One might have wondered how he found the time to write a series of books that fill several library shelves. Like most of his colleagues, this writer actually spends his nights sleeping in order to spend long hours every day at his desk, and drinks Vichy water so as not to strain his liver.

This does not prevent the average Frenchman, whose Saharan sobriety and mania for cleanliness are well known, from growing indignant at the idea of our writers teaching people to drink and not to wash. There is no dearth of examples. I personally can furnish an excellent cheap recipe for securing a reputation for austerity. I actually have so weighty a reputation, a source of great amusement to my friends (as far as I'm concerned, it rather makes me blush, since I know how little I deserve it).

It's enough, for instance, to decline the honor of dining with a newspaper editor of whom you do not have a high opinion. Even simple decency cannot be imagined except by reference to some twisted sickness of the soul. No one will ever imagine that if you refuse this editor's dinner, it may be not only because you haven't a very high opinion of him, but also because your greatest fear in the world is being bored—and what is more boring than a typical Parisian dinner?

One must therefore submit. But, from time to time, you can try to readjust the sights, and repeat that you can't always be a painter of the absurd and that no one can believe in a literature of despair. Of course, it is always possible to write, or to have written, an essay on the notion of the absurd. But after all, you can also write about incest without necessarily having hurled yourself on your unfortunate sister, and I have nowhere read that Sophocles ever thought of killing his father and dishonoring his mother. The idea that every writer necessarily writes about himself and depicts himself in his books is one of the puerile notions that we have inherited from Romanticism.

It is by no means impossible—quite the opposite—that a writer should be

interested first and foremost in other people, or in his time, or in well-known myths. Even if he does happen to put himself on stage, it is only very exceptionally that he talks about what he is really like. A man's works often retrace the story of his nostalgias or his temptations, practically never his own history especially when they claim to be autobiographical.

No man has ever dared describe himself as he is. On the other hand, as far as such a thing is possible, I should like to have been an objective writer. What I call an objective author is one who chooses themes without ever taking himself as the subject. But the modern mania of identifying the author with his subject matter will not allow him this relative creative liberty. Thus does one become a prophet of the absurd. Yet what else have I done except reason about an idea I discovered in the streets of my time? That I have nourished this idea (and part of me nourishes it still) along with my whole generation goes without saying.

I simply set it far enough away so that I could deal with it and decide on its logic. Everything that I've been able to write since shows this plainly enough. But it is more convenient to exploit a cliché than a nuance. They've chosen the cliché: so I'm as absurd as ever. What is the point of saying yet again that in the experience which interested me, and which I happened to write about, the absurd can be considered only as a point of departure—even though the memory and feeling of it still accompany the farther advances.

In the same manner, with all due sense of proportion, Cartesian doubt, which is systematic, was not enough to make Descartes a skeptic. In any case, how can one limit oneself to saying that nothing has meaning and that we must plunge into absolute despair? Without getting to the bottom of things, one can at least mention that just as there is no absolute materialism, since merely to form this word is already to acknowledge something in the world apart from matter, there is likewise no total nihilism.

The moment you say that everything is nonsense you express something meaningful. Refusing the world all meaning amounts to abolishing all value judgments. But living, and eating, for example, are in themselves value judgments. You choose to remain alive the moment you do not allow yourself to die of hunger, and consequently you recognize that life has at least a relative value. What, in fact, does "literature of despair" mean? Despair is silent. Even silence, moreover, is meaningful if your eyes speak. True despair is the agony of death, the grave or the abyss.

If he speaks, if he reasons, above all if he writes, immediately the brother reaches out his hand, the tree is justified, love is born. Literature of despair is a contradiction in terms.

Of course, a certain optimism is not my speciality. Like all men of my age, I grew up to the sound of the drums of the First World War, and our history since that time has remained murder, injustice, or violence. But real pessimism, which does exist, lies in outbidding all this cruelty and shame. For my part, I have never ceased fighting against this dishonor, and I hate only the cruel. I have sought only reasons to transcend our darkest nihilism.

Not, I would add, through virtue, nor because of some rare elevation of the spirit, but from an instinctive fidelity to a light in which I was born, and in which for thousands of years men have learned to welcome life even in suffering, Aeschylus is often heart-breaking; yet he radiates light and warmth. At the center of his universe, we find not fleshless nonsense but an enigma, that is to say, a meaning which is difficult to decipher because it dazzles us.

Likewise, to the unworthy but nonetheless stubborn sons of Greece who still survive in this emaciated century, the scorching heat of our history may seem unendurable, but they endure it in the last analysis because they want to understand it.

In the center of our work, dark though it may be, shines an inexhaustible sun, the same sun that shouts today across the hills and plain. After this, the

flaxen fire can burn; who cares what we appear to be and what we usurp? What we are, what we have to be, are enough to fill our lives and occupy our strength. Paris is a wondrous cave, and its inhabitants, seeing their own shadows reflected on the far wall, take them for the only reality there is.

The same is true of the strange, fleeting renown this town dispenses. But we have learned, far from Paris, that there is a light behind us, that we must turn around and cast off our chains in order to face it directly, and that our task before we die is to seek through any words to identify it.

Every artist is undoubtedly pursuing his truth. If he is a great artist, each work brings him nearer to it, or, at least, swings still closer toward this center, this buried sun where everything must one day burn. If he is mediocre, each work takes him further from it, the center is then everywhere, the light disintegrates. But the only people who can help the artist in his obstinate quest are those who love him, and those who, themselves lovers or creators, find in their own passion the measure of all passion, and hence know how to criticize.

Yes, all this noise ... when peace would be to love and create in silence! But we must learn to be patient. One moment more, the sun seals our mouths.

1950

<sup>1</sup> This essay, composed in 1950, was also dedicated to René Char. As it shows, Camus suffered a great deal from the failure of French critics and journalists to realize that his attitude was constantly evolving, and that *L'Étranger* (The Stranger) and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (The Myth of Sisyphus) did not necessarily contain all his ideas. Later on, even before the publication of *L'Homme révolté* (The Rebel) had led to violent public quarrels with André Breton in 1951 and Jean-Paul Sartre in 1952, Camus's pessimism about his relationship with his public and his literary colleagues became even more marked. Thus, on page 321 of *Carnets II* (Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 252) he noted that "Paris begins by serving a work of art and pushes it. But once it is established, then the fun begins. It is essential to destroy it. Thus there are, in Paris, as in certain streams in Brazil, thousands of little fish whose job this is. They are tiny, but innumerable. Their whole head, if I may say so, is in their teeth. And they completely remove the flesh from a man in five minutes, leaving nothing but the bare bones. They then go away, sleep a little, and begin again." —P.T.

## VII, Return to Tipasa

You sailed away from your father's dwelling  
With your heart on fire, Medea! And you passed  
Between the rocky gates of the seas;  
And now you sleep on a foreign shore.

Medea

For five days the rain had been falling unceasingly on Algiers, finally drenching the sea itself. From the heights of an apparently inexhaustible sky, unending sheets of rain, so thick they were viscous, crashed into the gulf. Soft and gray like a great sponge, the sea heaved in the shapeless bay. But the surface of the water seemed almost motionless beneath the steady rain.

At long intervals, however, a broad and imperceptible movement raised a murky cloud of steam from the sea and rolled it into the harbor, below a circle of soaking boulevards. The town itself, its white walls running with damp, gave off another cloud of steam that billowed out to meet the first. Whichever way you turned you seemed to be breathing water, you could drink the very air.



Looking at this drowned sea, seeing in December an Algiers that was still for me the city of summers, I walked about and waited. I had fled from the night of Europe, from a winter of faces. But even the town of summers was emptied of its laughter, offering me only hunched and streaming backs. In the evening, in the fiercely lit cafés where I sought refuge, I read my age on faces I recognized without knowing their names. All I knew was that these men had been young when I was, and that now they were young no longer.

I stayed on, though, without any clear idea of what I was waiting for, except, perhaps, the moment when I could go back to Tipasa. It is certainly a great folly, and one that is almost always punished, to go back to the places of one's youth, to want to relive at forty the things one loved or greatly enjoyed at twenty.

But I was aware of this folly. I had already been back to Tipasa once, not long after those war years that marked for me the end of my youth. I hoped, I think, to rediscover there a liberty I was unable to forget. Here, more than twenty years ago, I had spent whole mornings wandering among the ruins, breathing the scent of absinthe, warming myself against the stones, discovering the tiny, short-lived roses that survive in springtime.

Only at noon, when even the crickets are silenced by the heat, would I flee from the avid blaze of an all-consuming light. Sometimes, at night, I would sleep open-eyed beneath a sky flowing with stars. I was alive at those moments.

Fifteen years later, I found my ruins again. A few steps from the first waves, I followed the streets of the forgotten city across the fields covered with bitter trees; and, on the hills overlooking the bay, could still caress their pillars, which were the color of bread. But now the ruins were surrounded by barbed wire, and could be reached only through official entrances.

It was also forbidden, for reasons sanctioned, it would seem, by morality, to walk there after dark; by day, one would meet an official guard. That morning, doubtless by chance, it was raining across the whole sweep of the ruins.

Bewildered, walking through the lonely, rainsoaked countryside, I tried at least to recover the strength that has so far never failed me, that helps me to accept what is, once I have realized I cannot change it. I could not, of course, travel backward through time and restore to this world the face I had loved, which had disappeared in a single day a long time before. On the second of September, 1939, I not go to Greece, as I had planned. Instead, the war enveloped us, then Greece itself.

This distance, these years separating the warm ruins from the barbed wire, were also within me, as I stood that day staring at tombs filled with black water or beneath the dripping tamarisk trees. Raised above all in the spectacle of a beauty that was my only wealth, I had begun in plenty.

The barbed wire came later—I mean tyrannies, war, policings, the time of revolt. We had had to come to terms with night: the beauty of daytime was only a memory. And in this muddy Tipasa, even the memory was growing dim. No room now for beauty, fullness, or youth! In the light cast by the flames, the world had suddenly shown its wrinkles and its afflictions, old and new.

It had suddenly grown old, and we had too. I knew the ardor I had come in search of could only be roused in someone not expecting it. There is no love without a little innocence. Where was innocence? Empires were crumbling, men and nations were tearing at one another's throats; our mouths were dirtied. Innocent at first without knowing it, now we were unintentionally guilty: the more we knew, the greater the mystery.

This is why we busied ourselves, oh mockery, with morality. Frail in spirit, I dreamed of virtue! In the days of innocence, I did not know morality existed. Now I knew it did, and could not live up to it. On the promontory I had loved in

former days, between the drenched pillars of the ruined temple, I seemed to be walking behind someone whose footsteps I could still hear on the tombstones and mosaics, but whom I would never catch up with again. I went back to Paris, and stayed for some years before returning home again.

During all these years, however, I had a vague feeling of missing something. Once you have had the chance to love intensely, your life is spent in search of the same light and the same ardor. To give up beauty and the sensual happiness that comes with it and devote one's self exclusively to unhappiness requires a nobility I lack. But, after all, nothing is true that compels us to make it exclusive.

Isolated beauty ends in grimaces, solitary Justice in oppression. Anyone who seeks to serve the one to the exclusion of the other serves no one, not even himself, and in the end is doubly the servant of injustice. A day comes when, because we have been inflexible, nothing amazes us anymore, everything is known, and our life is spent in starting again. It is a time of exile, dry lives, dead souls. To come back to life, we need grace, a homeland, or to forget ourselves.

On certain mornings, as we turn a corner, an exquisite dew falls on our heart and then vanishes. But the freshness lingers, and this, always, is what the heart needs. I had to come back once again. And, in Algiers a second time, still walking under the same downpour that I felt had not stopped since what I thought was my final departure, in the midst of this immense melancholy smelling of rain and sea, in spite of the misty sky, the sight of people's backs fleeing beneath the deluge, the cafés whose sulphurous light decomposed everyone's face, I persisted in my hopes.

Anyway, didn't I know that rain in Algiers, although it looks as if it would go on forever, nonetheless does stop suddenly, like the rivers in my country that swell to a flood in two hours, devastate acres of land, and dry up again in an instant? One evening, in fact, the rain stopped. I waited still one more night.

A liquid morning rose, dazzling, over the pure sea. From the sky, fresh as a rose, washed and rewashed by the waters, reduced by each successive laundering to its most delicate and clearest texture, a quivering light fell, endowing each house, each tree, with a palpable shape and a magic newness. The earth must have risen in just such a light the morning the world was born. Once again I set out for Tipasa.

There is not a single one of these sixty-nine kilometers of highway that is not filled for me with memories and sensations. A violent childhood, adolescent daydreams to the hum of the bus's engines, mornings, the freshness of young girls, beaches, young muscles always tensed, the slight anguish that the evening brings to a sixteen-year-old heart, the desire to live, glory, and always the same sky, for months on end, with its inexhaustible strength and light, as companion to the years, a sky insatiable, one by one devouring victims lying crucified upon the beach at the funereal hour of noon.

Always the same sea as well, almost impalpable in the morning air, glimpsed again on the horizon as soon as the road, leaving the Sahel and its hills with their bronze-colored vineyards, dipped down toward the coast. But I did not stop to look at it.

I wanted to see the Chenoua again—that heavy, solid mountain, carved all in one piece and running along the west side of Tipasa Bay before descending into the sea. You see it from far away, long before you get there, as a light blue haze still mingling with the sea. But gradually it condenses as you come nearer, until it takes on the color of the waters surrounding it, like an immense and motionless wave brutally caught in the very act of breaking over a suddenly calm sea. Nearer still, almost at the gates of Tipasa, you see its frowning mass, brown and green, the old, unshakable, moss-covered god, port and haven for its sons, of whom I am one.

I was gazing at it as I finally crossed the barbed wire and stood among the ruins. And, in the glorious December light, as happens only once or twice in lives that may later be described as heaped with every blessing, I found exactly what I had come in search of, something which in spite of time and in spite of the world was offered to me and truly to me alone, in this deserted nature. From the olive-strewn forum, one could see the village down below.

Not a sound came from it; wisps of smoke rose in the limpid air. The sea also lay silent, as if breathless beneath the unending shower of cold, glittering light. From the Chenoua, a distant cock crow alone sang the fragile glory of the day. Across the ruins, as far as one could see, there were nothing but pitted stones and absinthe plants, trees and perfect columns in the transparence of the crystal air.

It was as if the morning stood still, as if the sun had stopped for an immeasurable moment. In this light and silence, years of night and fury melted slowly away. I listened to an almost forgotten sound within myself, as if my heart had long been stopped and was now gently beginning to beat again. And, now awake, I recognized one by one the imperceptible sounds that made up the silence: the basso continuo of the birds, the short, light sighing of the sea at the foot of the rocks, the vibration of the trees, the blind song of the columns, the whispering of the absinthe plants, the furtive lizards. I heard all this, and also felt the waves of happiness rising up within me.

I felt that I had at last come back to harbor, for a moment at least, and that from now on this moment would never end. But soon afterward the sun rose visibly a degree higher in the sky. A blackbird chirped its brief prelude and immediately, from all around, bird voices exploded with a strength, a jubilation, a joyful discord, an infinite delight. The day moved on. It was to carry me through till evening.

At noon, on the half-sandy slopes, strewn with heliotropes like a foam that the furious waves of the last few days had left behind in their retreat, I gazed at the sea, gently rising and falling as if exhausted, and quenched two thirsts that cannot be long neglected if all one's being is not to dry up, the thirst to love and the thirst to admire. For there is only misfortune in not being loved; there is misery in not loving.

All of us, today, are dying of this misery. This is because blood and hatred lay bare the heart itself; the long demand for justice exhausts even the love that gave it birth. In the clamor we live in, love is impossible and justice not enough. That is why Europe hates the daylight and can do nothing but confront one injustice with another. In order to prevent justice from shriveling up, from becoming nothing but a magnificent orange with a dry, bitter pulp, I discovered one must keep a freshness and a source of joy intact within, loving the daylight that injustice leaves unscathed, and returning to the fray with this light as a trophy.

Here, once more, I found an ancient beauty, a young sky, and measured my good fortune as I realized at last that in the worst years of our madness the memory of this sky had never left me. It was this that in the end had saved me from despair. I had always known that the ruins of Tipasa were younger than our drydocks or our debris. In Tipasa, the world is born again each day in a light always new. Oh light! The cry of all the characters in classical tragedy who come face to face with their destinies.

I knew now that their final refuge was also ours. In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer. Once more I left Tipasa, returning to Europe and its struggles. But the memory of that day sustains me still and helps me meet both joy and sorrow with equanimity. In the difficult times we face, what more can I hope for than the power to exclude nothing and to learn to weave from strands of black and white one rope tautened to the breaking point? In everything I've done or said so far, I seem to recognize these two forces, even when they contradict each other.

I have not been able to deny the light into which I was born and yet I have not wished to reject the responsibilities of our time. It would be too easy to set against the gentle name Tipasa other names more sonorous and more cruel: there is, for man today, an inner path that I know well from having traveled both ways upon it, which leads from the summits of the mind to the capitals of crime. And, doubtless, one can always rest, sleep on the hillside or settle into crime.

But if we give up a part of what exists, we must ourselves give up being; we must then give up living or loving except by proxy. Thus there is a will to live without refusing anything life offers:

the virtue I honor most in this world. From time to time, at least, it's true that I would like to have practiced it. Since few times require to the extent ours does that one be as equal to the best as to the worst, to avoid nothing and keep a double memory alive is precisely what I would like to do. Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever difficulties the enterprise may present, I would like never to be unfaithful either to the one or the other.

But this still sounds like ethics, and we live for something that transcends ethics. If we could name it, what silence would follow! East of Tipasa, the hill of Sainte-Salsa, evening has come to life. It is still light, of course, but an invisible waning of the light announces the sunset. A wind rises, gentle as the night, and suddenly the untroubled sea chooses its way and flows like a great barren river across the horizon. The sky darkens.

Then begins the mystery, the gods of night, and what lies beyond pleasure. But how can this be expressed? The little coin I carry back from here has one clear side, the face of a beautiful woman that reminds me of what I've learned in the course of this day, while the other side, which I feel beneath my fingers homeward bound, has been eaten away. What does this lipless mouth express if not what another, mysterious voice within me says, that daily teaches me my ignorance and my happiness:

The secret I am looking for is buried in a valley of olive trees, beneath the grass and cold violets, around an old house that smells of vines. For more than twenty years I have wandered over this valley, and over others like it, questioning dumb goatherds, knocking at the door of empty ruins. Sometimes, when the first star shines in a still, clear sky, beneath a rain of delicate light, I have thought that I knew. I did know, in fact.

Perhaps I still know. But no one is interested in this secret, doubtless I myself do not desire it, and I cannot cut myself off from my own people. I live with my family, who believe they reign over rich and hideous cities, built of stones and mists. Day and night it raises its voice, and everything yields beneath it while it bows down to nothing: it is deaf to all secrets. Its power sustains me and yet bores me, and I come to be weary of its cries.

But its unhappiness is my own, we are of the same blood. I too am sick, and am I not a noisy accomplice who has cried out among the stones? Thus I try to forget, I march through our cities of iron and fire, I smile bravely at the night, I welcome the storms, I will be faithful. In fact, I have forgotten: henceforth, I shall be deaf and active. But perhaps one day, when we are ready to die of ignorance and exhaustion, I shall be able to renounce our shrieking tombs, to go and lie down in the valley, under the unchanging light, and learn for one last time what I know.

1953

#### VIII, The Sea Close By1

Logbook I grew up with the sea and poverty for me was sumptuous; then I lost the sea and found all luxuries gray and poverty unbearable. Since then, I have been

waiting. I wait for the homebound ships, the house of the waters, the limpidity of day. I wait patiently, am polite with all my strength. I am seen walking by on fine, sophisticated streets, I admire landscapes, I applaud like everyone, shake hands, but it is not I who speak. Men praise me, I dream a little, they insult me, I scarcely show surprise. Then I forget, and smile at the man who insulted me, or am too courteous in greeting the person I love. Can I help it if all I remember is one image? Finally they summon me to tell them who I am.

"Nothing yet, nothing yet ..."

I surpass myself at funerals. Truly, I excel. I walk slowly through the iron strewn suburbs, taking the wide lanes planted with cement trees that lead to holes in the cold ground. There, beneath the slightly reddened bandage of the sky, I watch bold workmen inter my friends beneath six feet of earth. If I toss the flower a clay-covered hand holds out to me, it never misses the grave. My piety is exact, my feelings as they should be, my head suitably inclined. I am admired for finding just the right word. But I take no credit: I am waiting.

I have been waiting for a long time. Sometimes, I stumble, I lose my touch, success evades me. What does it matter, I am alone then. I wake up at night, and, still half asleep, think I hear the sound of waves, the breathing of waters.

Fully awake, I recognize the wind in the trees and the sad murmur of the empty town. Afterward, all my art is not too much to hide my anguish or clothe it in the prevailing fashion.

At other times, it's the opposite, and I am helped. On certain days in New York, lost at the bottom of those stone and steel shafts where millions of men wander, I would run from one shaft to the next, without seeing where they ended, until, exhausted, I was sustained only by the human mass seeking its way out.

But, each time, there was the distant honking of a tugboat to remind me that this empty well of a city was an island, and that off the tip of the Battery the water of my baptism lay in wait for me, black and rotting, covered with hollow corks.

Thus, I who own nothing, who have given away my fortune, who camp in all my houses, am still heaped, when I choose, with every blessing; I can set sail at any hour, a stranger to despair. There is no country for those who despair, but I know that the sea precedes and follows me, and I hold my madness ready. Those who love and are separated can live in grief, but this is not despair: they know that love exists. This is why I suffer, dry-eyed, in exile.

I am still waiting. A day comes, at last ... The sailors' bare feet beat softly on the deck. We are setting sail at daybreak. The moment we leave the harbor a short, gusty wind vigorously brushes the sea, which curls backward in small, foamless waves.

A little later, the wind freshens and strews the sea with swiftly vanishing camellias. Thus, throughout the morning, we hear our sails slapping above a cheerful pond. The waters are heavy, scaly, covered with cool froth. From time to time the waves lap against the bow; a bitter, unctuous foam, the gods' saliva, flows along the wood and loses itself in the water, where it scatters into shapes that die and are reborn, the hide of some white and blue cow, an exhausted beast that floats for a long time in our wake.

Ever since our departure, the Seagulls have been following our ship, apparently without effort, almost without moving their wings. Their fine, straight navigation scarcely leans upon the breeze. Suddenly, a loud plop at the level of the kitchens stirs up a greedy alarm among the birds, throwing their fine flight into confusion and sending up a fire of white wings.

The seagulls whirl madly in every direction and then with no loss of speed drop from the fight one by one and dive toward the sea. A few seconds later they are

together again on the water, a quarrelsome farmyard that we leave behind, nesting in the hollow of the wave, slowly picking through the manna of the scraps.

At noon, under a deafening sun, the sea is so exhausted it scarcely finds the strength to rise. When it falls back on itself it makes the silence whistle. After an hour's cooking, the pale water, a vast white-hot iron sheet, sizzles. In a minute it will turn and offer its damp side, now hidden in waves and darkness, to the sun.

We pass the gates of Hercules, the headland where Antaeus died. Beyond, there is ocean everywhere; on one side we pass the Horn and the Cape of Good Hope, the meridians wed the latitudes, the Pacific drinks the Atlantic. At once, setting course for Vancouver, we sail slowly toward the South Seas. A few cable lengths away, Easter Island, Desolation, and the New Hebrides file past us in convoy. Suddenly, one morning, the seagulls disappear. We are far from any land, and alone, with our sails and our engines.

Alone also with the horizon. The waves come from the invisible East, patiently, one by one; they reach us, and then, patiently, set off again for the unknown West, one by one. A long voyage, with no beginning and no end ... Rivers and streams pass by, the sea passes and remains. This is how one ought to love, faithful and fleeting. I wed the sea.

The high seas. The sun sinks and is swallowed by the fog long before it reaches the horizon. For a brief moment, the sea is pink on one side and blue on the other. Then the waters grow darker. The schooner slides, minute, over the surface of a perfect circle of thick, tarnished metal. And, at the most peaceful hour, as evening comes, hundreds of porpoises emerge from the water, frolic around us for a moment, then flee to the horizon where there are no men. With them gone, silence and the anguish of primitive waters are what remain.

. . .

A little later still, we meet an iceberg on the Tropic. Invisible, to be sure, after its long voyage in these warm waters, but still effective: it passes to starboard, where the rigging is briefly covered with a frosty dew, while to port the day dies without moisture.

Night does not fall at sea. It rises, rather, toward the still pale sky, from the depths of waters an already drowned sun gradually darkens with its thick ashes. For a brief moment, Venus shines alone above the black waves. In the twinkling of an eye, stars swarm in the liquid night.

The moon has risen. First it lights the water's surface gently, then climbs higher and inscribes itself in the supple water. At last, at its zenith, it lights a whole corridor of sea, a rich river of milk which, with the motion of the ship, streams down inexhaustibly toward us across the dark ocean. Here is the faithful night, the cool night I called for in the rollicking lights, the alcohol, the tumult of desire.

We sail across spaces so vast they seem unending. Sun and moon rise and fall in turn, on the same thread of light and night. Days at sea, as similar each to the other as happiness ...

This life rebellious to forgetfulness, rebellious to memory, that Stevenson speaks of.

Dawn. We sail perpendicularly across the Tropic of Cancer, the waters groan and are convulsed. Day breaks over a surging sea, full of steel spangles. The sky is white with mist and heat, with a dead but unbearable glare, as if the sun had turned liquid in the thickness of the clouds, over the whole expanse of the celestial vault. A sick sky over a decomposing sea. As the day draws on, the heat grows in the white air. All day long, our bow noses out clouds of flying fish, tiny iron birds, forcing them from their hiding places in the waves.

In the afternoon, we meet a steamer bound for home. The salute our foghorns exchange with three great prehistoric hoots, the signals of passengers lost at sea warning there are other humans present, the gradually increasing distance between the two ships, their separation at last on the malevolent waters, all this fills the heart with pain.

These stubborn madmen, clinging to planks tossed upon the mane of immense oceans, in pursuit of drifting islands: what man who cherishes solitude and the sea will ever keep himself from loving them? In the very middle of the Atlantic, we bend beneath the savage winds that blow endlessly from pole to pole.

Each cry we utter is lost, flies off into limitless space. But this shout, carried day after day on the winds, will finally reach land at one of the flattened ends of the earth and echo timelessly against the frozen walls until a man, lost somewhere in his shell of snow, hears it and wants to smile with happiness. I was half asleep in the early afternoon sun when a terrible noise awoke me. I saw the sun in the depths of the sea, the waves reigning in the surging heavens.

Suddenly, the sea was afire, the sun flowed in long icy draughts down my throat. The sailors laughed and wept around me. They loved, but could not forgive one another. I recognized the world for what it was that day. I decided to accept the fact that its good might at the same time be evil and its transgressions beneficial. I realized that day that there were two truths, and that one of them ought never to be uttered.

The curious austral moon, looking slightly paled, keeps us company for several nights and then slides rapidly from the sky into the sea, which swallows it. The Southern Cross, the infrequent stars, the porous air remain. At the same instant, the wind ceases. The sky rolls and pitches above our immobile masts. Engine dead, sails hove to, we are whistling in the warm night as the water beats amicably against our sides. No commands, the machines are silent.

Why indeed should we continue and why return? Our cup runneth over, a mute rapture lulls us invincibly to sleep. There are days like this when all is accomplished; we must let ourselves flow with them, like swimmers who keep on until exhausted. What can we accomplish? I have always concealed it from myself. Oh bitter bed, princely couch, the crown lies at the bottom of the seas.

In the morning, the lukewarm water foams gently under our propeller. We put on speed. Toward noon, traveling from distant continents, a herd of walrus cross our path, overtake us, and swim rhythmically to the north, followed by multicolored birds which from time to time alight upon their tusks. This rustling forest slowly vanishes on the horizon. A little later the sea is covered with strange yellow flowers. Toward evening, for hour after hour, we are preceded by an invisible song. Comfortably, I fall asleep.

All sails stretched to the keen breeze, we skim across a clear and rippling sea. At top speed, our helm goes hard to port. And toward nightfall, correcting our course again, listing so far to starboard that our sails skim the water, we sail rapidly along the side of a southern continent I recognize from having once flown blindly over it in the barbarous coffin of an airplane. I was an idle king and my chariot dawdled; I waited for the sea but it never came.

The monster roared, took off from the guano fields of Peru, hurled itself above the beaches of the Pacific, flew over the fractured white vertebrae of the Andes and then above the herds of flies that cover the immense Argentinian plain, linking in one swoop the milk-drowned Uruguayan meadows to Venezuela's black rivers, landing, roaring again, quivering with greed at the sight of new empty spaces to devour, and yet never failing to move forward or at least doing so only with a convulsed, obstinate slowness, a fixed, weary, and intoxicated energy.

I felt I was dying in this metallic cell and dreamed of bloodshed and orgies. Without space, there is neither innocence nor liberty! When a man cannot breathe, prison means death or madness; what can he do there but kill and possess? But today I have all the air I need, all our sails slap in the blue air, I am going to shout at the speed, we'll toss our sextants and compasses into the sea. Our sails are like iron under the imperious wind. The coast drifts at full speed before our eyes, forests of royal coconut trees whose feet are bathed by emerald lagoons, a quiet bay, full of red sails, moonlit beaches.

Great buildings loom up, already cracking under the pressure of the virgin forest that begins in the back yards; here and there a yellow ipecac or a tree with violet branches bursts through a window; Rio finally crumbles away behind us and the monkeys of the Tijuca will laugh and gibber in the vegetation that will cover its new ruins. Faster still, along wide beaches where the waves spread out in sheaves of sand, faster still, where the Uruguayan sheep wade into the sea and instantly turn it yellow. Then, on the Argentinian coast, great crude piles of faggots, set up at regular intervals, raise slowly grilling halves of oxen to the sky.

At night, the ice from Tierra del Fuego comes and beats for hours against our hull, the ship hardly loses speed and tacks about. In the morning, the single wave of the Pacific, whose cold foam boils green and white for thousands of kilometers along the Chilean coast, slowly lifts us up and threatens to wreck us. The helm avoids it, overtakes the Kerguelen Islands. In the sweetish evening the first Malayan boats come out to meet us.

"To sea! To sea!" shouted the marvelous boys in one of the books from my childhood. I have forgotten everything about that book except this cry. "To sea!", and across the Indian Ocean into the corridor of the Red Sea, where on silent nights one can hear the desert stones, scorched in the daytime, freeze and crack one by one as we return to the ancient sea in which all cries are hushed.

Finally, one morning, we drop anchor in a bay filled with a strange silence, beacons with fixed sails. A few sea birds are quarrelling in the sky over scraps of reeds. We swim ashore to an empty beach; all day plunging into the water and drying off on the sand. When evening comes, under a sky that turns green and fades into the distance, the sea, already calm, grows more peaceful still. Short waves shower vaporous foam on the lukewarm shore. The sea birds have disappeared.

All that is left is space, open to a motionless voyage. Knowing that certain nights whose sweetness lingers will keep returning to the earth and sea after we are gone, yes, this helps us die. Great sea, ever in motion, ever virgin, my religion along with night! It washes and satiates us in its sterile billows, frees us and holds us upright. Each breaker brings its promise, always the same. What does each say? If I were to die surrounded by cold mountains, ignored by the world, an outcast, at the end of my strength, at the final moment the sea would flood my cell, would lift me above myself and help me die without hatred.

At midnight, alone on the shore. A moment more, and I shall set sail. The sky itself has weighed anchor, with all its stars, like the ships covered with lights which at this very hour throughout the world illuminate dark harbors. Space and silence weigh equally upon the heart. A sudden love, a great work, a decisive act, a thought that transfigures, all these at certain moments bring the same unbearable anxiety, quickened with an irresistible charm. Living like this, in the delicious anguish of being, in exquisite proximity to a danger whose name we do not know, is this the same as rushing to our doom? Once again, without respite, let us race to our destruction.

I have always felt I lived on the high seas, threatened, at the heart of a royal happiness.



1953

1 This essay first appeared in the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1954. Camus first noted down his intention of writing an essay on the sea in *Carnets II*, p. 290, (Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 228) when he remarked that "the desperate man has no native land. I knew that the sea existed, and that is why I lived in the midst of this mortal time." —P.T.

## IX, The Rains of New York

New York rain is a rain of exile. Abundant, viscous and dense, it pours down tirelessly between the high cubes of cement into avenues plunged suddenly into the darkness of a well: seeking shelter in a cab that stops at a red light and starts again on a green, you suddenly feel caught in a trap, behind monotonous, fast-moving windshield wipers sweeping aside water that is constantly renewed. You are convinced you could drive like this for hours without escaping these square prisons or the cisterns through which you wade with no hope of a hill or a real tree. The whitened skyscrapers loom in the gray mist like gigantic tombstones for a city of the dead, and seem to sway slightly on their foundations.

At this hour they are deserted. Eight million men, the smell of steel and cement, the madness of builders, and yet the very height of solitude. "Even if I were to clasp all the people in the world against me, it would protect me from nothing."

The reason perhaps is that New York is nothing without its sky. Naked and immense, stretched to the four corners of the horizon, it gives the city its glorious mornings and the grandeur of its evenings, when a flaming sunset sweeps down Eighth Avenue over the immense crowds driving past the shop windows, whose lights are turned on well before nightfall.

There are also certain twilights along Riverside Drive, when you watch the parkway that leads uptown, with the Hudson below, its waters reddened by the setting sun; off and on, from the uninterrupted flow of gently, smoothly running cars, from time to time there suddenly rises a song that recalls the sound of breaking waves. Finally I think of other evenings, so gentle and so swift they break your heart, that cast a purple glow over the vast lawns of Central Park, seen from Harlem.

Clouds of Negro children are striking balls with wooden bats, shouting with joy; while elderly Americans, in checked shirts, sprawl on park benches, sucking molded ice creams on a stick with what energy remains to them; while squirrels burrow into the earth at their feet in search of unknown tidbits. In the park's trees, a jazz band of birds heralds the appearance of the first star above the Empire State Building, while long-legged creatures stride along the paths against a backdrop of tall buildings, offering to the temporarily gentle sky their splendid looks and their loveless glance. But when this sky grows dull, or the daylight fades, then once again New York becomes the big city, prison by day and funeral pyre by night.

A prodigious funeral pyre at midnight, as its millions of lighted windows amid immense stretches of blackened walls carry these swarming lights halfway up the sky, as if every evening a gigantic fire were burning over Manhattan, the island with three rivers, raising immense, smoldering carcasses still pierced with dots of flame.

I have my ideas about other cities but about New York only these powerful and fleeting emotions, a nostalgia that grows impatient, and moments of anguish. After so many months I still know nothing about New York, whether one moves about among madmen here or among the most reasonable people in the world;

whether life is as easy as all America says, or whether it is as empty here as it sometimes seems; whether it is natural for ten people to be employed where one would be enough and where you are served no faster; whether New Yorkers are liberals or conformists, modest souls or dead ones; whether it is admirable or unimportant that the garbage men wear well fitting gloves to do their work; whether it serves any purpose that the circus in Madison Square Garden puts on ten simultaneous performances in four different rings, so that you are interested in all of them and can watch none of them; whether it is significant that the thousands of young people in the skating rink where I spent one evening, a kind of vélodrome d'hiver bathed in reddish and dusty lights, as they turned endlessly on their roller skates in an infernal din of metal wheels and loud organ music, should look as serious and absorbed as if they were solving simultaneous equations; whether, finally, we should believe those who say that it is eccentric to want to be alone, or naïvely those who are surprised that no one ever asks for your identity card.

In short, I am out of my depth when I think of New York. I wrestle with the morning fruit juices, the national Scotch and soda and its relationship to romance, the girls in taxis and their secret, fleeting acts of love, the excessive luxury and bad taste reflected even in the stupefying neckties, the anti-Semitism and the love of animals—this last extending from the gorillas in the Bronx Zoo to the protozoa of the Museum of Natural History—the funeral parlors where death and the dead are made up at top speed (“Die, and leave the rest to us”), the barber shops where you can get a shave at three in the morning, the temperature that swings from hot to cold in two hours, the subway that reminds you of Sing Sing prison, ads filled with clouds of smiles proclaiming from every wall that life is not tragic, cemeteries in flower beneath the gasworks, the beauty of the girls and the ugliness of the old men; the tens of thousands of musical-comedy generals and admirals stationed at the apartment entrances, some to whistle for green, red, and yellow taxis that look like beetles, others to open the door for you, and finally the ones who go up and down all over town like multicolored Cartesian divers in elevators fifty stories high.

Yes, I am out of my depth. I am learning that there are cities, like certain women, who annoy you, overwhelm you, and lay bare your soul, and whose scorching contact, scandalous and delightful at the same time, clings to every pore of your body. This is how, for days on end, I walked around New York, my eyes filled with tears simply because the city air is filled with cinders, and half one's time outdoors is spent rubbing the eyes or removing the minute speck of metal that the thousand New Jersey factories send into them as a joyful greeting gift, from across the Hudson. In the end, this is how New York affects me, like a foreign body in the eye, delicious and unbearable, evoking tears of emotion and all-consuming fury.

Perhaps this is what people call passion. All I can say is that I know what contrasting images mine feeds on. In the middle of the night sometimes, above the skyscrapers, across hundreds of high walls, the cry of a tugboat would meet my insomnia, reminding me that this desert of iron and cement was also an island. I would think of the sea then, and imagine myself on the shore of my own land.

On other evenings, riding in the front of the Third Avenue El, as it greedily swallows the little red and blue lights it tears past at third story level, from time to time allowing itself to be slowly absorbed by half-dark stations, I watched the skyscrapers turning in our path. Leaving the abstract avenues of the center of town I would let myself ride on toward the gradually poorer neighborhoods, where there were fewer and fewer cars. I knew what awaited me, those nights on the Bowery.

A few paces from the half mile long stretch of splendid bridal shops (where not one of the waxen mannequins was smiling) the forgotten men live, those who have let themselves drift into poverty in this city of bankers. It is the gloomiest part of town, where you never see a woman, where one man in every three is

drunk, and where in a strange bar, apparently straight out of a Western, fat old actresses sing about ruined lives and a mother's love, stamping their feet to the rhythm and spasmodically shaking, to the bellowing from the bar, the parcels of shapeless flesh that age has covered them with. The drummer is an old woman too, and looks like a screech owl, and some evenings you feel you'd like to know her life—at one of those rare moments when geography disappears and loneliness becomes a slightly confused truth.

At other times ... but yes, of course, I loved the mornings and the evenings of New York. I loved New York, with that powerful love that sometimes leaves you full of uncertainties and hatred: sometimes one needs exile. And then the very smell of New York rain tracks you down in the heart of the most harmonious and familiar towns, to remind you there is at least one place of deliverance in the world, where you, together with a whole people and for as long as you want, can finally lose yourself forever.

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The end