

## The Wind at Djemila, Albert Camus

### The Wind at Djemila<sup>1</sup>

There are places where the mind dies so that a truth which is its very denial may be born. When I went to Djemila, there was wind and sun, but that is another story. What must be said first of all is that a heavy, unbroken silence reigned there—something like a perfectly balanced pair of scales.

The cry of birds, the soft sound of a three-hole flute, goats trampling, murmurs from the sky were just so many sounds added to the silence and desolation. Now and then a sharp clap, a piercing cry marked the upward flight of a bird huddled among the rocks.

Any trail one followed—the pathways through the ruined houses, along wide, paved roads under shining colonnades, across the vast forum between the triumphal arch and the temple set upon a hill—would end at the ravines that surround Djemila on every side, like a pack of cards opening beneath a limitless sky.

And one would stand there, absorbed, confronted with stones and silence, as the day moved on and the mountains grew purple surging upward. But the wind blows across the plateau of Djemila. In the great confusion of wind and sun that mixes

light into the ruins, in the silence and solitude of this dead city, something is forged that gives man the measure of his identity. It takes a long time to get to Djemila. It is not a town where you stop and then move further on. It leads nowhere and is a gateway to no other country. It is a place from which travelers return.

The dead city lies at the end of a long, winding road whose every turning looks like the last, making it seem all the longer. When its skeleton, yellowish as a forest of bones, at last looms up against the faded colors of the plateau, Djemila seems the symbol of that lesson of love and patience which alone can lead us to the world's beating heart.

There it lies, among a few trees and some dried grass, protected by all its mountains and stones from vulgar admiration, from being picturesque, and from the delusions of hope. We had wandered the whole day in this arid splendor. The wind, which we had scarcely felt at the beginning of the afternoon, seemed to increase as the hours went by, little by little filling the whole countryside. It blew from a gap in the mountains, far to the East, rushing from beyond the horizon, leaping and tumbling among the stones and in the sunlight.

It whistled loudly across the ruins, whirled through an amphitheater of stones and earth, bathing the heaps of pock-marked stone, circling each column with its breath and spreading out in endless cries on the forum, open to the heavens. I felt myself whipping in the wind like a mast, hollowed at the waist. Eyes burning, lips cracking, my skin became so dry it no longer seemed mine.

Until now, I had been deciphering the world's handwriting on my skin. There, on my body, the world had inscribed the signs of its tenderness or anger, warming with its summer breath or biting with its frosty teeth. But rubbed against for so long by the wind, shaken for more than an hour, staggering from resistance to it, I lost consciousness of the pattern my body traced. Like a pebble polished by the tides, I was polished by the wind, worn through to the very soul.

I was a portion of the great force on which I drifted, then much of it, then entirely it, confusing the throbbing of my own heart with the great sonorous beating of this omnipresent natural heart. The wind was fashioning me in the image of the burning nakedness around me. And its fugitive embrace gave me, a stone among stones, the solitude of a column or an olive tree in the summer sky.

The violent bath of sun and wind drained me of all strength. I scarcely felt the

quivering of wings inside me, life's complaint, the weak rebellion of the mind. Soon, scattered to the four corners of the earth, self- forgetful and self- forgotten, I am the wind and within it, the columns and the archway, the flagstones warm to the touch, the pale mountains around the deserted city. And never have I felt so deeply and at one and the same time so detached from myself and so present in the world.

Yes, I am present. And what strikes me at this moment is that I can go no further—like a man sentenced to life imprisonment, to whom everything is present. But also like a man who knows that tomorrow will be the same, and every other day. For when a man becomes conscious of what he is now, it means he expects nothing further.

If there are landscapes like moods, they are the most vulgar. All through this country I followed something that belonged not to me but to it, something like a taste for death we both had in common. Between the columns with their now lengthening shadows anxieties dissolved into the air like wounded birds.

And in their place came an arid lucidity. Anxiety springs from living hearts. But calm will hide this living heart: this is all I can see clearly. As the day moved forward, as the noises and lights were muffled by the ashes falling from the sky, deserted by myself, I felt defenseless against the slow forces within me that were saying no. Few people realize that there is a refusal that has nothing to do with renunciation. What meaning do words like future, improvement, good job have here? What is meant by the heart's progress?

If I obstinately refuse all the "later on's" of this world, it is because I have no desire to give up my present wealth. I do not want to believe that death is the gateway to another life. For me, it is a closed door. I do not say it is a step we must all take, but that it is a horrible and dirty adventure.

Everything I am offered seeks to deliver man from the weight of his own life. But as I watch the great birds flying heavily through the sky at Djemila, it is precisely a certain weight of life that I ask for and obtain.

If I am at one with this passive passion, the rest ceases to concern me. I have too much youth in me to be able to speak of death. But it seems to me that if I had to speak of it, I would find the right word here between horror and silence to express the conscious certainty of a death without hope.

We live with a few familiar ideas. Two or three. We polish and transform them according to the societies and the men we happen to meet. It takes ten years to have an idea that is really one's own—that one can talk about. This is a bit discouraging, of course. But we gain from this a certain familiarity with the splendor of the world. Until then, we have seen it face to face. Now we need to step aside to see its profile.

A young man looks the world in the face. He has not had time to polish the idea of death or of nothingness, even though he has gazed on their full horror. That is what youth must be like, this harsh confrontation with death, this physical terror of the animal who loves the sun. Whatever people may say, on this score at least, youth has no illusions. It has had neither the time nor the piety to build itself any.

And, I don't know why, but faced with this ravined landscape, this solemn and lugubrious cry of stone, Djemila, inhuman at nightfall, faced with this death of colors and hope, I was certain that when they reach the end of their lives, men worthy of the name must rediscover this confrontation, deny the few ideas they had, and recover the innocence and truth that gleamed in the eyes of the Ancients face to face with destiny.

They regain their youth, but by embracing death. There is nothing more despicable in this respect than illness. It is a remedy against death. It prepares us for it. It creates an apprenticeship whose first stage is selfpity.

It supports man in his great effort to avoid the certainty that he will die completely. But Djemila ... and then I feel certain that the true, the only, progress of civilization, the one to which a man devotes himself from time to time, lies in creating conscious deaths.

What always amazes me, when we are so swift to elaborate on other subjects, is the poverty of our ideas on death. It is a good thing or a bad thing, I fear it or I summon it (they say). Which also proves that everything simple is beyond us. What is blue, and how do we think "blue"? The same difficulty occurs with death. Death and colors are things we cannot discuss.

Nonetheless, the important thing is this man before me, heavy as earth, who prefigures my future. But can I really think about it? I tell myself: I am going to die, but this means nothing, since I cannot manage to believe it and can only experience other people's death. I have seen people die. Above all, I have seen dogs die.

It was touching them that overwhelmed me. Then I think of flowers, smiles, the desire for women, and realize that my whole horror of death lies in my anxiety to live. I am jealous of those who will live and for whom flowers and the desire for women will have their full flesh and blood meaning. I am envious because I love life too much not to be selfish. What does eternity matter to me. You can be lying in bed one day and hear someone say: "You are strong and I owe it to you to be honest: I can tell you that you are going to die"; you're there, with your whole life in your hands, fear in your bowels, looking the fool.

What else matters: waves of blood come throbbing to my temples and I feel I could smash everything around me.

But men die in spite of themselves, in spite of their surroundings. They are told: "When you get well ...," and they die. I want none of that. For if there are days when nature lies, there are others when she tells the truth. Djemila is telling the truth tonight, and with what sad, insistent beauty! As for me, here in the presence of this world, I have no wish to lie or to be lied to. I want to keep my lucidity to the last, and gaze upon my death with all the fullness of my jealousy and horror. It is to the extent I cut myself off from the world that I fear death most, to the degree I attach myself to the fate of living men instead of contemplating the unchanging sky.

Creating conscious deaths is to diminish the distance that separates us from the world and to accept a consummation without joy, alert to rapturous images of a world forever lost. And the melancholy song of the Djemila hills plunges this bitter lesson deeper in my soul.

Toward evening, we were climbing the slopes leading to the village and, retracing our steps, listened to explanations: "Here is the pagan town; this area outside the field is where the Christians lived. Later on ..." Yes, it is true. Men and societies have succeeded one another in this place; conquerors have marked this country with their noncommissioned officer's civilization. They had a vulgar and ridiculous idea of greatness, measuring the grandeur of their empire by the surface it covered.

The miracle is that the ruin of their civilization is the very negation of their ideal. For this skeleton town, seen from high above as evening closes in and white flights of pigeons circle round the triumphal arch, engraved no signs of conquest or ambition on the sky. The world always conquers history in the end.

The great shout of stone that Djemila hurls between the mountains, the sky, and the silence—well do I know its poetry: lucidity, indifference, the true signs of beauty or despair. The heart tightens at the grandeur we've already left behind. Djemila remains with its sad watery sky, the song of a bird from the other side of the plateau, the sudden, quick scurrying of goats along the mountainside,

and, in the calm, resonant dusk, the living face of a horned god on the pediment of an altar.

1 Camus went to Djémila in the spring of 1936, in a small tourist plane chartered by some of his friends. In the Carnets for 1936, there are references to this visit, but the actual essay does not seem to have been written until the following year. —P.T.

The end