

The Wrong Side and the Right Side (Betwixt and Between) (L'Envers et L'Endroit)
Albert Camus

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to Jean Grenier

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I, Preface

The essays collected in this volume were written in 1935 and 1936 (I was then twenty-two) and published a year later in Algeria in a very limited edition. This edition has been unobtainable for a long time and I have always refused to have *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* reprinted. There are no mysterious reasons for my stubbornness. I reject nothing of what these writings express, but their form has always seemed clumsy to me. The prejudices on art I cherish in spite of myself (I shall explain them further on) kept me for a long time from considering their republication.

A great vanity, it would seem, leading one to suppose that my other writings satisfy every standard. Need I say this isn't so? I am only more aware of the inadequacies in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* than of those in my other work. How can I explain this except by admitting that these inadequacies concern and reveal the subject closest to my heart. The question of its literary value settled, then, I can confess that for me this little book has considerable value as testimony.

I say for me, since it is to me that it reveals and from me that it demands a fidelity whose depth and difficulties I alone can know. I should like to try to explain why.

Brice Parain often maintains that this little book contains my best work. He is wrong. I do not say this, knowing how honest he is, because of the impatience every artist feels when people are impertinent enough to prefer what he has been to what he is. No, he is wrong because at twenty-two, unless one is a genius, one scarcely knows how to write. But I understand what Parain, learned enemy of art and philosopher of compassion, is trying to say. He means, and he is right, that there is more love in these awkward pages than in all those that have followed. Every artist thus keeps within himself a single source which nourishes during his lifetime what he is and what he says.

When that spring runs dry, little by little one sees his work shrivel and crack. These are art's wastelands, no longer watered by the invisible current. His hair grown thin and dry, covered with thatch, the artist is ripe for silence or the salons, which comes to the same thing. As for myself, I know that my source is in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, in the world of poverty and sunlight I lived in for so long, whose memory still saves me from two opposing dangers that threaten every artist, resentment and self-satisfaction.

Poverty, first of all, was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with light. Even my revolts were brilliant with sunshine. They were almost always, I think I can say this without hypocrisy, revolts for everyone, so that every life might be lifted into that light.

There is no certainty my heart was naturally disposed to this kind of love. But circumstances helped me. To correct a natural Indifference, I was placed halfway between poverty and the sun. Poverty kept me from thinking all was well under

the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history was not everything. I wanted to change lives, yes, but not the world which I worshipped as divine. I suppose this is how I got started on my present difficult career, innocently stepping onto the tightrope upon which I move painfully forward, unsure of reaching the end. In other words, I became an artist, if it is true that there is no art without refusal or consent.

In any case, the lovely warmth that reigned over my childhood freed me from all resentment. I lived on almost nothing, but also in a kind of rapture. I felt infinite strengths within me: all I had to do was find a way to use them. It was not poverty that got in my way: in Africa, the sun and the sea cost nothing. The obstacle lay rather in prejudices or stupidity. These gave me every opportunity to develop a "Castilian pride" that has done me much harm, that my friend and teacher Jean Grenier is right to make fun of, and that I tried in vain to correct, until I realized that there is a fatality in human natures.

It seemed better to accept my pride and try to make use of it, rather than give myself, as Chamfort would put it, principles stronger than my character. After some soul-searching, however, I can testify that among my many weaknesses I have never discovered that most widespread failing, envy, the true cancer of societies and doctrines.

I take no credit for so fortunate an immunity. I owe it to my family, first of all, who lacked almost everything and envied practically nothing. Merely by their silence, their reserve, their natural sober pride, my people, who did not even know how to read, taught me the most valuable and enduring lessons. Anyhow, I was too absorbed in feeling to dream of things. Even now, when I see the life of the very rich in Paris, there is compassion in the detachment it inspires in me. One finds many injustices in the world, but there is one that is never mentioned, climate.

For a long time, without realizing it, I thrived on that particular injustice. I can imagine the accusations of our grim philanthropists, if they should happen to read these lines. I want to pass the workers off as rich and the bourgeois as poor, to prolong the happy servitude of the former and the power of the latter. No, that is not it. For the final and most revolting injustice is consummated when poverty is wed to the life without hope or the sky that I found on reaching manhood in the appalling slums of our cities: everything must be done so that men can escape from the double humiliation of poverty and ugliness.

Though born poor in a working-class neighborhood, I never knew what real misfortune was until I saw our chilling suburbs. Even extreme Arab poverty cannot be compared to it, because of the difference in climate. But anyone who has known these industrial slums feels forever soiled, it seems to me, and responsible for their existence.

What I have said is nonetheless true. From time to time I meet people who live among riches I cannot even imagine. I still have to make an effort to realize that others can feel envious of such wealth. A long time ago, I once lived a whole week luxuriating in all the goods of this world:

we slept without a roof, on a beach, I lived on fruit, and spent half my days alone in the water. I learned something then that has always made me react to the signs of comfort or of a well-appointed house with irony, impatience, and sometimes anger. Although I live without worrying about tomorrow now, and therefore count myself among the privileged, I don't know how to own things. What I do have, which always comes to me without my asking for it, I can't seem to keep.

Less from extravagance, I think, than from another kind of parsimony:

I cling like a miser to the freedom that disappears as soon as there is an excess of things. For me, the greatest luxury has always coincided with a certain bareness. I love the bare interiors of Spanish or North African houses.

Where I prefer to live and work (and what is more unusual, where I would not mind dying) is in a hotel room. I have never been able to succumb to what is called home life (so often the very opposite of an inner life); "bourgeois" happiness bores and terrifies me.

This incapacity is nothing to brag about: it has made no small contribution to my worst faults. I don't envy anyone anything, which is my right, but I am not always mindful of the wants of others and this robs me of imagination, that is to say, kindness. I've invented a maxim for my own personal use: "We must put our principles into great things, mercy is enough for the small ones." Alas! We invent maxims to fill the holes in our own natures. With me, a better word for the aforementioned mercy would be indifference.

The results, as one can imagine, are less than miraculous. But all I want to emphasize is that poverty does not necessarily involve envy. Even later, when a serious illness temporarily deprived me of the natural vigor that always transfigured everything for me, in spite of the invisible infirmities and new weaknesses this illness brought, I may have known fear and discouragement, but never bitterness. The illness surely added new limitations, the hardest ones, to those I had already. In the end it encouraged that freedom of the heart, that slight detachment from human concerns, which has always saved me from resentment. Since living in Paris I have learned this is a royal privilege.

I've enjoyed it without restrictions or remorse, and until now at any rate, it has illuminated my whole life. As an artist, for example, I began by admiring others, which in a way is heaven on earth. (The present custom in France, as everyone knows, is to launch and even to conclude one's literary career by choosing an artist to make fun of.) My human passions, like my literary ones, have never been directed against others.

The people I have loved have always been better and greater than I. Poverty as I knew it taught me not resentment but a certain fidelity and silent tenacity. If I have ever forgotten them, either I or my faults are to blame, not the world I was born into.

The memory of those years has also kept me from ever feeling satisfied in the exercise of my craft. Here, as simply as I can, I'd like to bring up something writers normally never mention. I won't even allude to the satisfaction one supposedly feels at a perfectly written book or page. I don't know whether many writers experience it. As far as I'm concerned, I don't think I've ever found delight in re-reading a finished page.

I will even admit, ready to be taken at my word, that the success of some of my books has always surprised me. Of course, rather shabbily, one gets used to it. Even today, though, I feel like an apprentice compared to certain living writers I rank at their true worth. One of the foremost is the man to whom these essays were dedicated as long as twenty years ago.¹

Naturally, a writer has some joys he lives for and that do satisfy him fully. But for me, these come at the moment of conception, at the instant when the subject reveals itself, when the articulation of the work sketches itself out before the suddenly heightened awareness, at those delicious moments when imagination and intelligence are fused. These moments disappear as they are born. What is left is the execution, that is to say, a long period of hard work.

On another level, an artist also has the delights of vanity. The writer's profession, particularly in French society, is largely one of vanity. I say this without scorn, and with only slight regret. In this respect I am like everyone else; who is impervious to this ridiculous disease? Yet, in a society where envy and derision are the rule, the day comes when, covered with scorn, writers pay dearly for these poor joys. Actually, in twenty years of literary life, my work has brought very few such joys, fewer and fewer as time has passed.

Isn't it the memory of the truths glimpsed in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*

that has always kept me from feeling at ease in the public exercise of my craft and has prompted the many refusals that have not always won me friends? By ignoring compliments and homages we lead the person paying those compliments to think we look down on him, when in fact we are only doubting ourselves.

By the same token, if I had shown the mixture of harshness and indulgence sometimes found in literary careers, if like so many others I had exaggerated a bit, I might have been looked upon more favorably, for I would have been playing the game. But what's to be done, the game does not amuse me! The ambitions of a Lucien de Rubempré or a Julien Sorel often disconcert me in their naïveté and their modesty. Nietzsche's, Tolstoy's, or Melville's overwhelm me, precisely because of their failure. I feel humility, in my heart of hearts, only in the presence of the poorest lives or the greatest adventures of the mind. Between the two is a society I find ludicrous.

Sometimes on those opening nights at the theater, which are the only times I ever meet what is insolently referred to as "all Paris," it seems to me that the audience is about to vanish, that this fashionable world does not exist. It is the others who seem real to me, the tall figures sounding forth upon the stage. Resisting the impulse to flee, I make myself remember that every one in the audience also has a rendezvous with himself: that he knows it and will doubtless be keeping it soon.

Immediately he seems like a brother once more; solitudes unite those society separates. Knowing this, how can one flatter this world, seek its petty privileges, agree to congratulate every author of every book, and openly thank the favorable critic. Why try to seduce the enemy, and above all how is one to receive the compliments and admiration that the French (in the author's presence anyway, for once he leaves the room!...) dispense as generously as Pernod or the fan magazines.

I can't do it and that's a fact. Perhaps there is a lot of that churlish pride of mine here, whose strength and extent I know only too well. But if this were all, if only my vanity were involved, it seems to me that I ought to enjoy compliments, superficially at least, instead of repeatedly being embarrassed by them. No, the vanity I share with others comes mostly when I react to criticisms that have some measure of truth.

It's not conceit that makes me greet compliments with that stupid, ungrateful look I know so well, but (along with the profound indifference that haunts me like a natural infirmity) a strange feeling that comes over me: "You're missing the point ..." Yes, they are missing the point, and that is why a reputation, as it's called, is sometimes so hard to bear that one takes a kind of malicious pleasure in doing everything one can to lose it.

On the other hand, re-reading *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* for this edition after so many years, I know instinctively that certain pages, despite their inadequacies, are the point. I mean that old woman, a silent mother, poverty, light on the Italian olive trees, the populated loneliness of love—all that in my opinion reveals the truth.

Since these pages were written I have grown older and lived through many things. I have learned to recognize my limits and nearly all my weaknesses. I've learned less about people, since their destiny interests me more than their reactions, and destinies tend to repeat each other. I've learned at least that other people do exist, and that selfishness, although it cannot be denied, must try to be clear-sighted. To enjoy only oneself is impossible, I know, although I have great gifts in this direction. If solitude exists, and I don't know if it does, one should certainly have the right to dream of it occasionally as paradise.

I do from time to time, like everyone else. Yet two tranquil angels have always kept me from that paradise: one has a friend's face, the other an enemy's. Yes, I know all this and I've also learned or nearly learned the price of love. But about life itself I know no more than what is said so clumsily in *The Wrong Side*

and the Right Side.

"There is no love of life without despair of life," I wrote, rather pompously, in these pages. I didn't know at the time how right I was; I had not yet been through years of real despair. They came, and managed to destroy everything in me except an uncontrolled appetite for life.

I still suffer from this both fruitful and destructive passion that bursts through even the gloomiest pages of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*. It's been said we really live for only a few hours of our life.

This is true in one sense, false in another. For the hungry ardor one can sense in these essays has never left me; in the last analysis, this appetite is life at its best and at its worst. I've certainly tried to correct its worst effects. Like everyone, I've done my best to improve my nature by means of ethics. Alas, the price has been high. With energy, something I've a good deal of, one sometimes manages to behave morally, but never to be moral.

To long for morality when one is a man of passion is to yield to injustice at the very moment one speaks of justice. Man sometimes seems to me a walking injustice: I am thinking of myself. If I now have the impression I was wrong, or that I lied sometimes in what I wrote, it is because I do not know how to treat my iniquity honestly. Surely I've never claimed to be a just man. I've only said that we should try to be just, and also that such an ambition involves suffering and unhappiness. But is this distinction so important? And can the man who does not even manage to make justice prevail in his own life preach its virtues to other people? If only we could live according to honor—that virtue of the unjust! But our society finds the word obscene; "aristocratic" is a literary and philosophical insult.

I am not an aristocrat, my reply is in this book: here are my people, my teachers, my ancestry, here is what, through them, links me with everyone. And yet I do need honor, because I am not big enough to do without it!

What does it matter? I merely wanted to show that if I have come a long way since this book, I have not made much progress. Often, when I thought I was moving forward, I was losing ground. But, in the end, my needs, my errors, and my fidelities have always brought me back to the ancient path I began to explore in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, whose traces are visible in everything I've done since, and along which on certain mornings in Algiers, for example, I still walk with the same slight intoxication.

If this is so, why have I so long refused to produce this feeble testimony? First of all because, I must repeat, I have artistic scruples just as other men have moral and religious ones. If I am stuck with the notion "such things are not done," with taboos in general rather alien to my tree nature, it's because I am the slave, and an admiring one, of a severe artistic tradition. Since this uneasiness may be at war with my profound anarchy, it strikes me as useful. I know my disorder, the violence of certain instincts, the graceless abandon into which I can throw myself. In order to be created, a work of art must first of all make use of the dark forces of the soul.

But not without channeling them, surrounding them with dikes, so that the water in them rises. Perhaps my dikes are still too high today. From this, the occasional stiffness ... Someday, when a balance is established between what I am and what I say, perhaps then, and I scarcely dare write it, I shall be able to construct the work I dream of. What I have tried to say here is that in one way or another it will be like *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and that it will speak of a certain form of love.

The second reason I've kept these early essays to myself will then be clear: clumsiness and disorder reveal too much of the secrets closest to our hearts; we also betray them through too careful a disguise. It is better to wait until we are skillful enough to give them a form that does not stifle their voice, until

we know how to mingle nature and art in fairly equal doses; in short, to be.

For being consists of being able to do everything at the same time. In art, everything comes at once or not at all; there is no light without flame. Stendhal once cried: "But my soul is a fire which suffers if it does not blaze." Those who are like him in this should create only when afire. At the height of the flame, the cry leaps straight upward and creates words which in their turn reverberate. I am talking here about what all of us, artists unsure of being artists, but certain that we are nothing else, wait for day after day, so that in the end we may agree to live. Why then, since I am concerned with what is probably a vain expectation, should I now agree to republish these essays? First of all because a number of readers have been able to find a convincing argument.²

And then, a time always comes in an artist's life when he must take his bearings, draw closer to his own center, and then try to stay there. Such is my position today, and I need say no more about it. If, in spite of so many efforts to create a language and bring myths to life, I never manage to rewrite *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, I shall have achieved nothing. I feel this in my bones. But nothing prevents me from dreaming that I shall succeed, from imagining that I shall still place at the center of this work the admirable silence of a mother and one man's effort to rediscover a justice or a love to match this silence.

In the dream that life is, here is man, who finds his truths and loses them on this mortal earth, in order to return through wars, cries, the folly of justice and love, in short through pain, toward that tranquil land where death itself is a happy silence. Here still ... Yes, nothing prevents one from dreaming, in the very hour of exile, since at least I know this, with sure and certain knowledge: a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.

This is why, perhaps, after working and producing for twenty years, I still live with the idea that my work has not even begun. From the moment that the republication of these essays made me go back to the first pages I wrote, it was mainly this I wanted to say.

¹ Jean Grenier was Camus's philosophy teacher at the Lycée d'Alger and later at the University of Algiers. It was under his direction that Camus undertook research for his *Diplôme d'études supérieures*, which he successfully completed in 1936, on *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*. —P.T.

² A simple one. "This book already exists, but in a small number of copies sold by booksellers at a very high price. Why should wealthy readers be the only ones with the right to read it?"
Why indeed?

II, Irony

Two years ago, I knew an old woman. She was suffering from an illness that had almost killed her. The whole of her right side had been paralyzed. Only half of her was in this world while the other was already foreign to her. This bustling, chattering old lady had been reduced to silence and immobility. Alone day after day, illiterate, not very sensitive, her whole life was reduced to God. She believed in him. The proof is that she had a rosary, a lead statue of Christ, and a stucco statue of Saint Joseph carrying the infant Jesus. She doubted her illness was incurable, but said it was so that people would pay attention to her. For everything else, she relied on the God she loved so poorly.

One day someone did pay attention to her. A young man. (He thought there was a truth and also knew that this woman was going to die, but did not worry about solving this contradiction.) He had become genuinely interested in the old woman's boredom. She felt it. And his interest was a godsend for the invalid. She was eager to talk about her troubles: she was at the end of her tether, and

you have to make way for the rising generation. Did she get bored? Of course she did. No one spoke to her. She had been put in her corner, like a dog. Better to be done with it once and for all. She would sooner die than be a burden to anyone.

Her voice had taken on a quarrelsome note, like someone haggling over a bargain. Still, the young man understood. Nonetheless, he thought being a burden on others was better than dying. Which proved only one thing: that he had surely never been a burden to any one. And of course he told the old lady—since he had seen the rosary: “You still have God.” It was true. But even here she had her troubles. If she happened to spend rather a long time in prayer, if her eyes strayed and followed a pattern in the wallpaper, her daughter would say:

“There she is, praying again!” “What business is that of yours?” the invalid would say. “It’s none of my business, but eventually it gets on my nerves.” And the old woman would fall silent, casting a long, reproachful look at her daughter. The young man listened to all this with an immense, unfamiliar pain that hurt his chest. And the old woman went on: “She’ll see when she’s old.

She’ll need it too.”

You felt that this old woman had been freed of everything except God, wholly abandoned to this final evil, virtuous through necessity, too easily convinced that what still remained for her was the only thing worth loving, finally and irrevocably plunged into the wretchedness of man in God. But if hope in life is reborn, God is powerless against human interests.

They had sat down at table. The young man had been invited to dinner. The old lady wasn’t eating, because it is difficult to digest in the evening. She had stayed in her corner, sitting behind the young man who had been listening to her. And because he felt he was being watched he couldn’t eat very much. Nevertheless, the dinner progressed. They decided to extend the party by going to the cinema. As it happened, there was a funny film on that week. The young man had blithely accepted, without thinking about the person who continued to exist behind his back.

The guests had risen from table to go and wash their hands before leaving. There was obviously no question of the old lady’s going too. Even if she hadn’t been half-paralyzed, she was too ignorant to be able to understand the film. She said she didn’t like the movies. The truth was she couldn’t understand them. In any case, she was in her corner, vacantly absorbed in the beads of her rosary. This was where she put all her trust. The three objects she kept near her represented the material point where God began. Beyond and behind the rosary, the statue of Christ, or of Saint Joseph, opened a vast, deep blackness in which she placed all her hope.

Everyone was ready. They went up to the old lady to kiss her and wish her a good night. She had already realized what was happening and was clutching her rosary tightly in her hand. But it was plain this showed as much despair as zeal. Everyone else had kissed her. Only the young man was left. He had given her an affectionate handshake and was already turning away. But she saw that the one person who had taken an interest in her was leaving. She didn’t want to be alone.

She could already feel the horror of loneliness, the long, sleepless hours, the frustrating intimacy with God. She was afraid, could now rely only on man, and, clinging to the one person who had shown any interest in her, held on to his hand, squeezing it, clumsily thanking him in order to justify this insistence. The young man was embarrassed. The others were already turning round to tell him to hurry up. The movie began at nine and it was better to arrive early so as not to have to wait in line. He felt confronted by the most atrocious suffering he had ever known: that of a sick old woman left behind by people going to the movies. He wanted to leave and escape, didn’t want to know, tried to draw back his hand. For a moment, he felt an intense hatred for the old woman, and almost

slapped her hard across the face.

Finally he managed to get away, while the invalid, half rising from her armchair, watched with horror as the last certainty in which she could have found rest faded away. Now there was nothing to protect her. And, defenseless before the idea of death, she did not know exactly what terrified her, but felt that she did not want to be alone. God was of no use to her. All He did was cut her off from people and make her lonely.

She did not want to be without people. So she began to cry. The others were already outside in the street. The young man was gripped with remorse. He looked up at the lighted window, a great dead eye in the silent house. The eye closed. The old woman's daughter told the young man: "She always turns the light off when she's by herself. She likes to sit in the dark."¹

The old man brought his eyebrows triumphantly together, wagging a sententious forefinger. "When I was a young man," he said, "my father used to give me five francs a week out of my wages as pocket money to last me till the following Saturday. Well, I still managed to save. First of all, when I went to see my fiancée, I walked four miles through the open country to get there and four miles to get back. Just you listen to me now, young men just don't know how to amuse themselves nowadays." There were three young men sitting at a round table with this one old man. He was describing his petty adventures—childish actions overblown, incidents of laziness celebrated as victories.

He never paused in his story, and, in a hurry to tell everything before his audience left, mentioned only those portions of his past he thought likely to impress them. Making people listen was his only vice: he refused to notice the irony of the glances and the sudden mockery that greeted him. The young man saw in him the usual old bird for whom everything was marvelous in his day, while he thought himself the respected elder whose experience carries weight.

The young don't know that experience is a defeat and that we must lose everything in order to win a little knowledge. He had suffered. He never mentioned it. It's better to seem happy. And if he were wrong about this, he would have been even more mistaken to try to make people sympathize with him. What do an old man's sufferings matter when life absorbs you completely? He talked on and on, wandering blissfully through the grayness of his mutterings. But it couldn't last. He needed an ending, and the attention of his listeners was waning. He wasn't even funny any longer; he was old. And young men like billiards and cards, which take their minds off the imbecility of everyday work.

Soon he was alone, despite his efforts and the lies he told to enliven his story. With no attempt to spare his feelings, the young men had left. Once again he was alone. No longer to be listened to: that's the terrible thing about being old. He was condemned to silence and loneliness. He was being told that he would soon be dead. And an old man who is going to die is useless, he is even an insidious embarrassment. Let him go. He ought to go. Or, if not, to shut up is the least he can do. He suffers, because as soon as he stops talking he realizes that he is old. Yet he did get up and go, smiling to everyone around him.

But the faces he saw were either indifferent, or convulsed by a gaiety that he had no right to share. A man was laughing: "She's old, I don't deny it, but sometimes the best stews are made in old pots." Another, already more seriously: "Well, we're not rich but we eat well. Look at my grandson now, he eats more than his father. His father needs a pound of bread, he needs two! And you can pile on the sausage and Camembert. And sometimes when he's finished he says: 'Han, han!' and keeps on eating." The old man moved away. And with his slow step, the short step of the donkey turning the wheel, he walked through the crowds of men on the long pavements.

He felt ill and did not want to go home. Usually he was quite happy to get home to his table and the oil lamp, the plates where his fingers mechanically found their places. He still liked to eat his supper in silence, the old woman on the

other side of the table, chewing over each mouthful, with an empty head, eyes fixed and dead. This evening, he would arrive home later. Supper would have been served and gone cold, his wife would be in bed, not worrying about him since she knew that he often came home unexpectedly late. She would say: "He's in the moon again," and that would be that.

Now he was walking along with his gently insistent step. He was old and alone. When a life is reaching its end, old age wells up in waves of nausea. Everything comes down to not being listened to any more. He walks along, turns at the corner of the street, stumbles, and almost falls.

I've seen him. It's ridiculous, but what can you do about it? After all, he prefers being in the street, being there rather than at home, where for hours on end fever veils the old woman from him and isolates him in his room. Then, sometimes, the door slowly opens and gapes ajar for a moment. A man comes in. He is wearing a light-colored suit. He sits down facing the old man and the minutes pass while he says nothing.

He is motionless, just like the door that stood ajar a moment ago. From time to time he strokes his hair and sighs gently. When he has watched the old man for a long time with the same heavy sadness in his eyes, he leaves, silently. The latch clicks behind him and the old man remains, horrified, with an acid and painful fear in his stomach. Out in the street, however few people he may meet, he is never alone. His fever sings.

He walks a little faster: tomorrow everything will be different, tomorrow. Suddenly he realizes that tomorrow will be the same, and, after tomorrow, all the other days. And he is crushed by this irreparable discovery. It's ideas like this that kill one. Men kill themselves because they cannot stand them—or, if they are young, they turn them into epigrams.

Old, mad, drunk, nobody knows. His will be a worthy end, tear-stained and admirable. He will die looking his best, that is to say, he will suffer. That will be a consolation for him. And besides, where can he go? He will always be old now. Men build on their future old age. They try to give this old age, besieged by hopelessness, an idleness that leaves them with no defense.

They want to become foremen so they can retire to a little house in the country. But once they are well on in years, they know very well this is a mistake. They need other men for protection. And as far as he was concerned, he needed to be listened to in order to believe in his life. The streets were darker and emptier now. There were still voices going by. In the strange calm of evening they were becoming more solemn. Behind the hills encircling the town there were still glimmers of daylight. From somewhere out of sight, smoke rose, imposingly, behind the wooded hilltops. It rose slowly in the sky, in tiers, like the branches of a pine tree. The old man closed his eyes. As life carried away the rumblings of the town, and the heavens smiled their foolish, indifferent smile, he was alone, forsaken, naked, already dead.

Need I describe the other side of this fine coin? Doubtless, in a dark and dirty room, the old woman was laying the table. When dinner was ready she sat down, looked at the clock, waited a little longer, and then began to eat a hearty meal. She thought to herself: "He is in the moon."

That would be that.

There were five of them living together: the grandmother, her younger son, her elder daughter, and the daughter's two children. The son was almost dumb; the daughter, an invalid, could think only with difficulty; and of the two children, one was already working for an insurance company while the other was continuing his studies. At seventy, the grandmother still dominated all these people. Above her bed you could see a portrait taken of her five years before, upright in a black dress that was held together at the neck by a medallion, not a wrinkle on her face. With enormous clear, cold eyes, she had a regal posture she

relinquished only with increasing age, but which she still sometimes tried to recover when she went out.

It was these clear eyes that held a memory for her grandson which still made him blush. The old woman would wait until there were visitors and would ask then, looking at him severely, "Whom do you like best? Your mother or your grandmother?" The game was even better when the daughter was present. For the child would always reply: "My grandmother," with, in his heart, a great surge of love for his ever silent mother.

Then, when the visitors were surprised at this preference, the mother would say: "It's because she's the one who brought him up." It was also because the old woman thought that love is something you can demand. The knowledge that she herself had been a good mother gave her a kind of rigidity and intolerance. She had never deceived her husband, and had borne him nine children. After his death, she had brought up her family energetically. Leaving their little farm on the outskirts, they had ended up in the old, poor part of the town where they had been living for a long time.

And certainly this woman was not lacking in qualities. But to her grandsons, who were at the age of absolute judgments, she was nothing but a fraud. One of their uncles had told them a significant story: he had gone to pay a visit to his mother-in-law, and from the outside had seen her sitting idly at the window. But she had come to the door with a duster in her hand and had apologized for carrying on working by saying that she had so little free time left after doing her housework.

And it must be confessed that this was typical. She fainted very easily after family discussions. She also suffered from painful vomiting caused by a liver complaint. But she showed not the slightest discretion in the practice of her illness. Far from shutting herself away, she would vomit noisily into the kitchen garbage can. And when she came back into the room, pale, her eyes running with tears from the effort, she would remind anyone who begged her to go to bed that she had to get the next meal ready and carry on in running the house: "I do everything here." Or again: "I don't know what would become of you without me."

The children learned to ignore her vomitings, her "attacks" as she called them, as well as her complaints. One day she went to bed and demanded the doctor. They sent for him to humor her. On the first day he diagnosed a slight stomach upset, on the second a cancer of the liver, on the third a serious attack of jaundice. But the younger of the two children insisted on seeing all this as yet another performance, a more sophisticated act, and felt no concern. This woman had bullied him too much for his initial reaction to be pessimistic.

And there is a kind of desperate courage in being lucid and refusing to love. But people who play at being ill can succeed: the grandmother carried simulation to the point of death. On her last day, her children around her, she began freeing herself of the fermentations in her intestines. She turned and spoke with simplicity to her grandson: "You see," she said, "I'm farting like a little pig." She died an hour later.

As for her grandson, he now realized that he had not understood a thing that was happening. He could not free himself of the idea that he had just witnessed the last and most monstrous of this woman's performances. And if he asked himself whether he felt any sorrow, he could find none at all. Only on the day of the funeral, because of the general outburst of tears, did he weep, but he was afraid of being insincere and telling lies in the presence of death. It was on a fine winter's day, shot through with sunlight. In the pale blue sky, you could sense the cold all spangled with yellow. The cemetery overlooked the town, and you could see the fine transparent sun setting in the bay quivering with light, like a moist lip.

None of this fits together? How very true! A woman you leave behind to go to the

movies, an old man to whom you have stopped listening, a death that redeems nothing, and then, on the other hand, the whole radiance of the world. What difference does it make if you accept everything? Here are three destinies, different and yet alike. Death for us all, but his own death to each. After all, the sun still warms our bones for us.

1 Roger Quillot, in his notes to the second volume of Camus's works published in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 1965, traces the ideas Camus expresses in these essays to the very first literary sketches written in 1932, when he was only nineteen. A manuscript belonging to Camus's first wife, Simone Hié, presents the themes of loneliness and old age, and specifically mentions the old woman left behind by the young people who go to the cinema. In 1935 Camus sketched a plan for these essays that indicates he intended to center them around the son's relationship with his mother. He first had the idea of writing a preface to a new edition of these essays in 1949, and read part of this one to Quillot in 1954. The essays were originally published in 1937, by the small firm of Charlot, in Algiers. The account of Camus's home life in the last section of *Irony* and in the essay *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* include the most openly autobiographical passages in all of his work. His father was killed at the first battle of the Marne in 1914 (cf. page 38), and he lived with his mother, his grandmother, and his elder brother Lucien in the working-class suburb of Belcourt in Algiers. -P.T.

III, Between Yes and No

If it is true that the only paradises are those we have lost. I know what name to give the tender and inhuman something that dwells in me today. An emigrant returns to his country. And I remember. The irony and tension fade away, and I am home once more. I don't want to ruminate on happiness. It is much simpler and much easier than that. For what has remained untouched in these hours I retrieve from the depths of forgetfulness is the memory of a pure emotion, a moment suspended in eternity. Only this memory is true in me, and I always discover it too late. We love the gentleness of certain gestures, the way a tree fits into a landscape. And we have only one detail with which to recreate all this love, but it will do: the smell of a room too long shut up, the special sound of a footstep on the road. This is the way it is for me.

And if I loved then in giving myself, I finally became myself, since only love restores us.

Slow, peaceful, and grave, these hours return, just as strong, just as moving—there is a kind of vague desire in the dull sky. Each rediscovered gesture reveals me to myself. Someone once said to me: "It's so difficult to live."

And I remember the tone of voice. On another occasion, someone murmured: "The worst blunder is still to make people suffer," When everything is over, the thirst for life is gone. Is this what's called happiness? As we skirt along these memories, we clothe everything in the same quiet garb, and death looks like a backdrop whose colors have faded. We turn back into ourselves. We feel our distress and like ourselves the better for it. Yes, perhaps that's what happiness is, the self-pitying awareness of our unhappiness.

It is certainly like that this evening. In this Moorish café, at the far end of the Arab town, I recall not a moment of past happiness but a feeling of strangeness. It is already night. On the walls, canary-yellow lions pursue green-clad sheiks among five-branched palm trees. In a corner of the café, an acetylene lamp gives a flickering light. The real light comes from the fire, at the bottom of a small stove adorned with yellow and green enamel. The flames fight up the middle of the room, and I can feel them reflected on my face.

I sit facing the doorway and the bay. Crouched in a corner, the café owner seems to be looking at my glass, which stands there empty with a mint leaf at the bottom. There is no one in the main room, noises rise from the town opposite, while further off in the bay lights shine. I hear the Arab breathe heavily, and

his eyes glow in the dusk. Is that the sound of the sea far off? The world sighs toward me in a long rhythm, and brings me the peace and indifference of immortal things.

Tall red shadows make the lions on the walls sway with a wavelike motion. The air grows cool. A foghorn sounds at sea. The beams from the lighthouse begin to turn: one green, one red, and one white. And still the world sighs its long sigh. A kind of secret song is born of this indifference.

And I am home again. I think of a child living in a poor district. That neighborhood, that house! There were only two floors, and the stairs were unlit. Even now, long years later, he could go back there on the darkest night. He knows that he could climb the stairs without stumbling once. His very body is impregnated with this house. His legs retain the exact height of the steps; his hand, the instinctive, never-conquered horror of the bannister. Because of the cockroaches.

On summer evenings, the workingmen sit on their balconies. In his apartment, there was only one tiny window. So they would bring the chairs down, put them in front of the house, and enjoy the evening air. There was the street, the ice-cream vendor next door, the cafés across the way, and the noise of children running from door to door. But above all, through the wide fig trees there was the sky. There is a solitude in poverty, but a solitude that gives everything back its value.

At a certain level of wealth, the heavens themselves and the star-filled night are nature's riches. But seen from the very bottom of the ladder, the sky recovers its full meaning: a priceless grace. Summer nights mysterious with crackling stars! Behind the child was a stinking corridor, and his little chair, splitting across the bottom, sank a little beneath his weight.

But, eyes raised, he drank in the pure night. Sometimes a large tram would rattle swiftly past. A drunk would stand singing at a street corner, without disturbing the silence.

The child's mother sat as silently. Sometimes, people would ask her: "What are you thinking about?" And she would answer: "Nothing." And it was quite true. Everything was there, so she thought about nothing. Her life, her interests, her children were simply there, with a presence too natural to be felt. She was frail, had difficulty in thinking.

She had a harsh and domineering mother who sacrificed everything to a touchy animal pride and had long held sway over her weak-minded daughter. Emancipated by her marriage, the daughter came home obediently when her husband died. He died a soldier's death, as they say. One could see his gold-framed military medal and croix de guerre in a place of honor. The hospital sent the widow the small shell splinter found in his body. She kept it.

Her grief has long since disappeared. She has forgotten her husband, but still speaks of her children's father. To support these children, she goes out to work and gives her wages to her mother, who brings them up with a whip. When she hits them too hard, the daughter tells her: "Don't hit them on the head." Because they are her children she is very fond of them. She loves them with a hidden and impartial love. Sometimes, on those evenings he's remembering, she would come back from her exhausting work (as a cleaning woman) to find the house empty, the old woman out shopping, the children still at school. She would huddle in a chair, gazing in front of her, wandering off in the dizzy pursuit of a crack along the floor.

As the night thickened around her, her muteness would seem irredeemably desolate. If the child came in, he would see her thin shape and bony shoulders, and stop, afraid. He is beginning to feel a lot of things. He is scarcely aware of his own existence, but this animal silence makes him want to cry with pain. He feels sorry for his mother; is this the same as loving her? She has never

hugged or kissed him, for she wouldn't know how.

He stands a long time watching her. Feeling separate from her, he becomes conscious of her suffering. She does not hear him, for she is deaf. In a few moments, the old woman will come back, life will start up again: the round light cast by the kerosene lamp, the oilcloth on the table, the shouting, the swearing. Meanwhile, the silence marks a pause, an immensely long moment. Vaguely aware of this, the child thinks the surge of feeling in him is love for his mother. And it must be, because after all she is his mother.

She is thinking of nothing. Outside, the light, the noises; here, silence in the night. The child will grow, will learn. They are bringing him up and will ask him to be grateful, as if they were sparing him pain. His mother will always have these silences. He will suffer as he grows. To be a man is what counts. His grandmother will die, then his mother, then he.

His mother has given a sudden start. Something has frightened her. He looks stupid standing there gazing at her. He ought to go and do his homework. The child has done his homework. Today he is in a sordid café. Now he is a man. Isn't that what counts?

Surely not, since doing homework and accepting manhood leads to nothing but old age. Still crouching in his corner, the Arab sits with his hands clasped round his feet. The scent of roasting coffee rises from the terraces and mingles with the excited chatter of young voices. The hooting of a tugboat adds its grave and tender note. The world is ending here as it does each day, and all its measureless torments now give rise to nothing but this promise of peace.

The indifference of this strange mother! Only the immense solitude of the world can be the measure of it. One evening, they had called her son—he was already quite grown up—to his mother's side. A fright had brought on a serious mental shock. She was in the habit of going out on the balcony at the end of the day. She would take a chair and lean her mouth against the cold and salty iron of the railing. Then she would watch the people going past. Behind her, the night would gradually thicken. In front of her, the shops would suddenly light up.

The street would fill with people and fights. She would gaze emptily out until she forgot where she was. On this particular evening, a man had loomed up behind her, dragged her backward, knocked her about, and run away when he heard a noise. She had seen nothing, and fainted. She was in bed when her son arrived. He decided, on the doctor's advice, to spend the night with her. He stretched out on the bed, by her side, lying on the top of the blankets. It was summer.

The fear left by the recent drama hung in the air of the overheated room. Footsteps were rustling and doors creaked. The smell of the vinegar used to cool his mother's brow floated in the heavy air. She moved restlessly about, whimpering, sometimes giving a sudden start, which would shake him from his brief snatches of sleep. He would wake drenched in sweat, ready to act—only to fall back heavily after glancing at his watch on which the night light threw dancing shadows.

It was only later that he realized how much they had been alone that night. Alone against the others. The "others" were asleep, while they both breathed the same fever. Everything in the old house seemed empty. With the last midnight trams all human hope seemed drained away, all the certainties of city noises gone. The house was still humming with their passage; then little by little everything died away. All that remained was a great garden of silence interrupted now and then by the sick woman's frightened moans.

He had never felt so lost. The world had melted away, taking with it the illusion that life begins again each morning. Nothing was left, his studies, ambitions, things he might choose in a restaurant, favorite colors. Nothing but the sickness and death he felt surrounded by ... And yet, at the very moment that the world was crumbling, he was alive. Finally he fell asleep, but not without taking with him the tender and despairing image of two people's loneliness

together. Later, much later, he would remember this mingled scent of sweat and vinegar, this moment when he had felt the ties attaching him to his mother. As if she were the immense pity he felt spread out around him, made flesh, diligently, without pretense, playing the part of a poor old woman whose fate moves men to tears.

Now the ashes in the grate are beginning to choke the fire. And still the same sigh from the earth. The perfect song of a derbouka is heard in the air, a woman's laughter above it. In the bay, the fights come closer— fishing vessels no doubt, returning to harbor. The triangle of sky I see from where I am sitting is stripped of its daylight clouds. Choked with stars, it quivers on a pure breeze and the padded wings of night beat slowly around me.

How far will it go, this night in which I cease to belong to myself? There is a dangerous virtue in the word simplicity. And tonight I can understand a man wanting to die because nothing matters anymore when one sees through life completely. A man suffers and endures misfortune after misfortune. He bears them, settles into his destiny. People think well of him. And then, one evening, he meets a friend he has been very fond of, who speaks to him absent-mindedly.

Returning home, the man kills himself. Afterwards, there is talk of private sorrows and secret dramas. No, if a reason really must be found, he killed himself because a friend spoke to him carelessly. In the same way, every time it seems to me that I've grasped the deep meaning of the world, it is its simplicity that always overwhelms me. My mother, that evening, and its strange indifference. On another occasion, I was living in a villa in the suburbs, alone with a dog, a couple of cats and their kittens, all black.

The mother cat could not feed them. One by one, all the kittens died. They filled the room with their filth. Every evening, when I arrived home, I would find one lying stiff, its gums laid bare. One evening, I found the last one, half eaten by the mother. It stank already.

The stench of death mingled with the stench of urine. Then, with my hands in the filth and the stench of rotting flesh reeking in my nostrils, I sat down in the midst of all this misery and gazed for hour after hour at the demented glow in the cat's green eyes as it crouched motionless in the corner. Yes.

And it is just like that this evening. When we are stripped down to a certain point, nothing leads anywhere any more, hope and despair are equally groundless, and the whole of life can be summed up in an image. But why stop there? Simple, everything is simple, the fights alternating in the lighthouse, one green, one red, one white; the cool of the night; and the smell of the town and the poverty that reach me from below.

If, this evening, the image of a certain childhood comes back to me, how can I keep from welcoming the lesson of love and poverty it offers? Since this hour is like a pause between yes and no, I leave hope or disgust with life for another time. Yes, only to capture the transparency and simplicity of paradises lost—in an image. And so it was not long ago, in a house in an old part of town, when a son went to see his mother. They sat down facing each other, in silence. But their eyes met: "Well, mother."

"Well, here we are."

"Are you bored? I don't talk much."

"Oh, you've never talked much."

And though her lips do not move her face lights up in a beautiful smile. It's true, he never talked much to her. But did he ever need to? When one keeps quiet, the situation becomes clear. He is her son, she is his mother. She can say to him: "You know."

She is sitting at the foot of the divan, her feet together, her hands together in her lap. He, on his chair, scarcely looks at her and smokes ceaselessly. A silence. "You shouldn't smoke so much."

"I know."

The whole feeling of the neighborhood rises through the window: the accordion from the café next door, the traffic hurrying in the evening, the smell of the skewers of grilled meat eaten between small, springy rolls of bread, a child crying in the road. The mother rises and picks up her knitting. Her fingers are clumsy, twisted with arthritis. She works slowly, taking up the same stitch three or four times or undoing a whole row with a dull ripping sound. "It's a little cardigan. I'll wear it with a white collar. With this and my black coat, I'll be dressed for the season."

She has risen to turn on the light.

"It gets dark early these days."

It was true. Summer was over and autumn had not yet begun. Swifts were still calling in the gentle sky.

"Will you come back soon?"

"But I haven't left yet. Why do you mention that?" "Oh, it was just to say something."

A trolley goes by. A car.

"Is it true I look like my father?"

"The spitting image. Of course, you didn't know him. You were six months old when he died. But if you had a little moustache!" He mentioned his father without conviction. No memory, no emotion. Probably he was very ordinary. Besides, he had been very keen to go to war. His head was split open in the battle of the Marne. Blinded, it took him a week to die; his name is listed on the local war memorial. "When you think about it," she says, "it was better that way. He would have come back blind or crazy. So, the poor man ..." "That's right."

What is it then that keeps him in this room, except the certainty that it's still the best thing to do, the feeling that the whole absurd simplicity of the world has sought refuge here.

"Will you be back again?" she says. "I know you have work to do. Just from time to time ..."

But where am I now? And how can I separate this deserted café from that room in my past? I don't know any longer whether I'm living or remembering. The beams from the lighthouse are here. And the Arab stands in front of me telling me that he is going to close. I have to leave.

I no longer want to make such dangerous descents. It is true, as I take a last look at the bay and its light, that what wells up in me is not the hope of better days but a serene and primitive indifference to everything and to myself. But I must break this too limp and easy curve. I need my lucidity. Yes, everything is simple. It's men who complicate things. Don't let them tell us any stories. Don't let them say about the man condemned to death: "He is going to pay his debt to society," but: "They're going to chop his head off." It may seem like nothing. But it does make a little difference. There are some people who prefer to look their destiny straight in the eye.

IV, Death in the Soul¹

I arrived in Prague at six in the evening. Right away, I took my bags to the checkroom. I still had two hours to look for a hotel. And I was full of a strange feeling of liberty because I no longer had two suitcases hanging on my arms. I came out of the station, walked by some gardens, and suddenly found myself in the middle of the Avenue Wenceslas, swarming with people at that time of evening. Around me were a million human beings who had been alive all this time whose existence had never concerned me. They were alive. I was thousands of kilometers from home. I could not understand their language. They walked quickly, all of them. And as they overtook and passed me, they cut themselves off from me. I felt lost.

I had little money. Enough to live on for six days. After that, friends would be joining me. Just the same, I began to feel anxious. So I started looking for a

cheap hotel. I was in the new part of the town, and all the places I came upon were glittering with lights, laughter, and women. I walked faster. Something in my rapid pace already seemed like flight. Toward eight in the evening, exhausted, I reached the old town. Drawn by a modest-looking hotel with a small doorway, I enter. I fill in the form, take my key. I have room number 34, on the third floor. I open the door to find myself in a most luxurious room.

I look to see how much it costs: twice as expensive as I'd thought. The money question is suddenly acute. Now I can live only scrimpily in this great city. My distress, still rather vague a few moments ago, fixes itself on this one point. I feel uneasy, hollow and empty. Nevertheless, a moment of lucidity: I have always been credited, rightly or wrongly, with the greatest indifference to money. Why should I be worried? But already my mind is working. I must get something to eat, I start walking again and look for a cheap restaurant. I should spend no more than ten crowns on each meal. Of all the restaurants I see, the least expensive is also the least attractive.

I walk up and down in front of it. The people inside begin to notice my antics: I have to go in. It is a rather murky cellar, painted with pretentious frescoes. The clientele is fairly mixed. A few prostitutes, in one corner, are smoking and talking seriously to one another. A number of men, for the most part colorless and of indeterminate age, sit eating at the tables.

The waiter, a colossus in a greasy dinner jacket, leans his enormous, expressionless head in my direction. I quickly make a random choice of a dish from what, for me, is an incomprehensible menu. But it seems there is need for explanations. The waiter asks a question in Czech. I reply with what little German I know. He does not know German. I'm at a loss. He summons one of the girls, who comes forward in the classic pose, left hand on hip, cigarette in the right, smiling moistly.

She sits down at my table and asks questions in a German I judge as bad as my own. Everything becomes clear. The waiter was pushing the plat du jour. Game for anything, I order it. The girl talks to me but I can't understand her anymore. Naturally, I say yes in my most sincere tone of voice. But I am not with it. Everything annoys me, I hesitate, I don't feel hungry. I feel a twinge of pain and a tightness in my stomach. I buy the girl a glass of beer because I know my manners. The plat du jour having arrived, I start to eat: a mixture of porridge and meat, ruined by an unbelievable amount of cumin.

But I think about something else, or rather of nothing at all, staring at the fat, laughing mouth of the woman in front of me. Does she think I am inviting her favors? She is already close to me, starts to make advances. An automatic gesture from me holds her back. (She was ugly. I have often thought that if she had been pretty I would have avoided everything that happened later.) I was afraid of being sick, then and there, in the midst of all those people ready to laugh; still more afraid of being alone in my hotel room, without money or enthusiasm, reduced to myself and my miserable thoughts. Even today, I still wonder with embarrassment how the weary, cowardly creature I then became could have emerged from me. I left. I walked about in the old town, but unable to stomach my own company any longer, I ran all the way to my hotel, went to bed, and waited for sleep, which came almost at once.

Any country where I am not bored is a country that teaches me nothing. That was the kind of remark I tried out to cheer myself up. Need I describe the days that followed? I went back to my restaurant. Morning and evening, I endured that atrocious, sickening cumin-flavored food. As a result, I walked around all day with a constant desire to vomit. I resisted the impulse, knowing one must be fed. Besides, what did this matter compared to what I would have had to endure if I had tried a new restaurant? Here, at least, I was "recognized." People gave me a smile even if they didn't speak to me. On the other hand, anguish was gaining ground. I paid too much attention to that sharp twinge of pain in my head. I decided to organize my days, to cover them with points of reference.

I stayed in bed as late as possible and the days were consequently shorter. I washed, shaved, and methodically explored the town. I lost myself in the sumptuous baroque churches, looking for a homeland in them, emerging emptier and more depressed after a disappointing confrontation with myself. I wandered along the Vltava and saw the water swirling and foaming at its dams. I spent endless hours in the immense, silent, and empty Hradchin district. At sunset, in the shadow of its cathedral and palaces, my lonely footsteps echoed in the streets. Hearing them, the panic seized me again. I had dinner early and went to bed at half past eight.

The sun pulled me out of myself. I visited churches, palaces and museums, tried to soften my distress in every work of art. A classic dodge: I wanted my rebellion to melt into melancholy. But in vain. As soon as I came out, I was a stranger again. Once, however, in a baroque cloister at the far end of the town, the softness of the hour, the bells tinkling slowly, the clusters of pigeons flying from the old tower, and something like a scent of herbs and nothingness gave rise within me to a tear-filled silence that almost delivered me. Back at the hotel that evening, I wrote the following passage in one sitting: I reproduce it here unchanged, since its very pomposity reminds me of how complex my feelings were: "What other profit can one seek to draw from travel?"

Here I am, stripped bare, in a town where the signs are strange, unfamiliar hieroglyphics, with no friends to talk to, in short, without any distraction. I know very well that nothing will deliver me from this room filled with the noises of a foreign town, to lead me to the more tender glow of a fireside or a place I'm fond of. Should I shout for help? Unfamiliar faces would appear. Churches, gold, incense, everything flings me back into this daily life where everything takes its color from my anguish. The curtain of habits, the comfortable loom of words and gestures in which the heart drowns, slowly rises, finally to reveal anxiety's pallid visage.

Man is face to face with himself: I defy him to be happy ... And yet this is how travel enlightens him. A great discord occurs between him and the things he sees. The music of the world finds its way more easily into this heart grown less secure. Finally stripped bare, the slightest solitary tree becomes the most tender and fragile of images. Works of art and women's smiles, races of men at home in their land and monuments that summarize the centuries, this is the moving and palpable landscape that travel consists of.

Then, at twilight, this hotel room where once again the hollow feeling eats at me, as if my soul were hungry." Need I confess that all this was just a means of getting to sleep? I can admit it now. What I remember of Prague is the smell of cucumbers soaked in vinegar that you buy at any street corner to eat between your fingers. Their bitter, piquant scent would awaken my anguish and quicken it as soon as I crossed the threshold of my hotel.

That, and perhaps a certain tune played on an accordion as well. Beneath my windows, a blind, one-armed man would sit on his instrument, holding it in place with one buttock while opening and shutting it with his good hand. It was always the same childish, tender tune that woke me every morning, abruptly returning me to the unadorned reality in which I was floundering. I remember too that on the banks of the Vltava I would suddenly stop, and seized by the scent or the melody, carried almost beyond myself, would murmur: "What does it mean? What does it mean?" But I had doubtless not yet gone over the edge. On the fourth day, at about ten in the morning, I was getting ready to go out.

I wanted to see a certain Jewish cemetery I'd not been able to find the day before. Someone knocked at the door of the next room. After a moment's silence, they knocked again. A long knock this time, but apparently there was no answer. A heavy step went down the stairs. Without paying attention to what I was doing, my mind empty, I wasted a few moments reading the instructions for a shaving cream that I had already been using for a month. The day was heavy. A coppery light fell from the grey sky on the spires and domes of old Prague.

As they did every morning, the newsboys were calling the name of a newspaper, Narodni Politika. I tore myself with difficulty from the torpor that was overcoming me. But just as I was going out, I passed the bellman who looked after my particular floor, armed with a bunch of keys. I stopped. He knocked again, for a long time. He tried to open the door. No success. It must have been bolted on the inside. More knocks. The room sounded so ominously empty that, depressed as I was, I left without asking any questions. But out in the Prague streets a painful foreboding pursued me. How shall I ever forget the bellman's silly face, the funny way his polished shoes curled upward, the button missing from his jacket? I had lunch finally, but with a growing feeling of disgust. At about two in the afternoon, I went back to my hotel.

The staff was whispering in the lobby. I climbed the stairs rapidly, the quicker to face what I was expecting. It was just as I'd thought. The door of the room was half open, so that all that could be seen was a high, blue-painted wall. But the dull light I mentioned earlier threw two shadows on this screen: that of the dead man lying on the bed and a policeman guarding the body. The two shadows were at right angles to each other. The light overwhelmed me. It was authentic, a real light, an afternoon light, signifying life, the sort of light that makes one aware of living.

He was dead. Alone in his room. I knew it was not suicide. I dashed back into my room and threw myself on the bed. A man like so many others, short and fat as far as I could tell from his shadow. He had probably been dead for quite a while. And life had gone on in the hotel, until the bellman had thought of calling him. He had come without suspecting anything and died, alone. Meanwhile, I had been reading the advertisement for my shaving cream. I spent the afternoon in a state that would be hard to describe. I lay on my bed, thinking of nothing, with a strange heaviness in my heart. I cut my nails. I counted the cracks in the floorboards. "If I can count up to a thousand ..." At fifty or sixty, I gave up. I couldn't go on. I could understand nothing of the noises outside.

Once, though, in the corridor, a stifled voice, a woman's voice, said in German: "He was so good." Then I thought desperately of home, of my own town on the shores of the Mediterranean, of its gentle summer evenings that I love so much, suffused in green light and filled with young and beautiful women. It was days since I had uttered a single word and my heart was bursting with the cries and protests I had stifled. If anyone had opened his arms to me, I would have wept like a child. Toward the end of the afternoon, broken with weariness, I stared madly at the door handle, endlessly repeating a popular accordion tune in my empty head.

At that moment I had gone as far as I could. I had no more country, city, hotel room, or name. Madness or victory, humiliation or inspiration—was I about to know, or to be destroyed? There was a knock at the door and my friends came in. I was saved, if disappointed. I believe I even said: "I'm glad to see you again." But I'm sure I stopped there, and that in their eyes I still looked like the man they had left. I left Prague not long after. And I certainly took an interest in what I saw later. I could note down such and such an hour in the little Gothic cemetery of Bautzen, the brilliant red of its geraniums and the blue morning sky.

I could talk about the long, relentless, barren plains of Silesia. I crossed them at daybreak. A heavy flight of birds was passing in the thick, misty morning, above the sticky earth. I also liked Moravia, tender and grave, with its distant, pure horizons, its roads bordered with sour plum trees. But inside I still felt the dizziness of those who have gazed too long into a bottomless pit. I arrived in Vienna, left a week later. Still the numbness held me captive.

Yet in the train taking me from Vienna to Venice, I was waiting for something. I was like a convalescent fed on bouillon wondering how his first crust of bread will taste. Light was about to break through. I know now what it was: I was ready to be happy. I'll mention only the six days I lived on a hill near Vicenza. I am still there, or rather, I still find myself

there again occasionally, when the scent of rosemary brings it flooding back.

I enter Italy. A land that fits my soul, whose signs I recognize one by one as I approach. The first houses with their scaly tiles, the first vines flat against a wall made blue by sulphur dressings, the first clothes hung out in the courtyards, the disorder of the men's untidy, casual dress. And the first cypress (so slight and yet so straight), the first olive tree, the dusty fig tree. The soul exhausts its revolts in the shady piazzas of small Italian towns, in noontimes when pigeons look for shelter, in slowness and sloth—passion melts by degrees into tears, and then, Vicenza.

Here the days revolve from the daybreak, swollen with roosters' crowing to the unequalled evenings, sweetish and tender, silky behind the cypress trees, their long hours measured by the crickets' chirping. The inner silence that accompanies me rises from the slow pace that leads from each of these days to the next. What more can I long for than this room opening on the plain below, with its antique furniture and its hand-made lace.

I have the whole sky on my face and I feel as if I could follow these slow, revolving days forever, spinning motionlessly with them. I breathe in the only happiness I can attain—an attentive and friendly awareness. I spend the whole day walking about: from the hill, I go down to Vicenza or else further into the country. Every person I meet, every scent on this street is a pretext for my measureless love. Young women looking after a children's summer camp, the ice-cream vendor's horn (his cart is a gondola on wheels, pushed by two handles), the displays of fruit, red melons with black pips, translucent, sticky grapes—all are props for the person who can no longer be alone.²

But the cicadas' tender and bitter chirping, the perfume of water and stars one meets on September nights, the scented paths among the lentisks and the rosebushes, all these are signs of love for the person forced to be alone.³ Thus pass the days. After the dazzling glare of hours filled with sun, the evenings come, in the splendid golden backdrop of the sun setting behind the darkness of the cypress trees.

I walk along the road toward the crickets one hears from far away. As I advance, one by one they begin to sing more cautiously, and then fall silent. I move forward slowly, oppressed by so much ardent beauty. Behind me, one by one, the crickets' voices swell once more: a mystery hangs in this sky from which beauty and indifference descend. In a last gleam of light, I read on the front of a villa: "In magnificentia naturae, resurgit spiritus." This is where I should stop.

Already the first star shines, three lights gleam on the hill opposite, night has fallen suddenly, unannounced. A breeze murmurs in the bushes behind me, the day has fled, leaving its sweetness behind. I had not changed, of course. It was simply that I was no longer alone. In Prague, I was suffocating, surrounded by walls. Here, I was face to face with the world, and liberated from myself. I people the universe with forms in my own likeness. For I have not yet spoken of the sun. Just as it took me a long time to realize my attachment and love for the world of poverty in which I spent my childhood, only now can I see the lesson of the sun and the land I was born in.

A little before noon I went out and walked toward a spot I knew that looked out over the immense plain of Vicenza. The sun had almost reached its zenith, the sky was an intense, airy blue. The light it shed poured down the hillsides, clothing cypresses and olive trees, white houses and red roofs in the warmest of robes, then losing itself in the plain that was steaming in the sun. Each time I had the same feeling of being laid bare.

The horizontal shadow of that little fat man was still inside me. And what I could touch with my finger in these plains whirling with sunlight and dust, in these close-cropped hills all crusty with burnt grass, was one form, stripped

to its essentials, of that taste for nothingness that I carried within me. This country restored my very heart, and put me face to face with my secret anguish.

It was and yet was not the anguish I had felt in Prague. How can I explain it? Certainly, looking at this Italian plain, peopled with trees, sunshine, I grasped better than I had before this smell of death and inhumanity that had now been pursuing me for a month. Yes, this fullness without tears, this peace without joy that filled me was simply a very clear awareness of what I did not like—renunciation and disinterest. In the same way, the man who is about to die, and knows it, takes no interest in what will happen to his wife, except in novels. He realizes man's vocation, which is to be selfish—that is to say, someone who despairs. For me, this country held no promise of immortality.

What would be the point of feeling alive once more in the soul, if I had no eyes to see Vicenza, no hands to touch the grapes of Vicenza, no skin to feel the night's caress on the road from Monte Berico to the Villa Valmarana?

Yes, all this was true. But the sun filled me also with something else that I cannot really express. At this extreme point of acute awareness everything came together, and my life seemed a solid block to be accepted or rejected. I needed a grandeur. I found it in the confrontation between my deep despair and the secret indifference of one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. I drew from it the strength to be at one and the same time both courageous and aware. So difficult and paradoxical a thing was enough for me. But perhaps I have exaggerated a bit what I felt then so sincerely.

I often think of Prague and the mortal days I spent there. I'm back in my own town again. Occasionally, though, the sour smell of cucumbers and vinegar reawakens my distress. Then I need to think of Vicenza. Both are dear to me, and I find it hard to separate my love of fight and life from my secret attachment to the experience of despair that I have tried to describe. It will be clear already that I don't want to bring myself to choose between them. In the suburbs of Algiers, there is a little cemetery with black iron gates. If you go the far end, you look out over the valley with the sea in the distance.

You can spend a long time dreaming before this offering that sighs with the sea. But when you retrace your steps, you find a slab that says "Eternal regrets" on an abandoned grave. Fortunately, there are idealists to tidy things up.

1 This essay was inspired by Camus's 1936 visit to Prague. According to his own working notebooks, the Carnets, he finished it in 1937 after the last essay in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, "Love of Life." His decision to place it before "Love of Life" in the finished volume suggests that an upsurge of happiness can follow closely after the experience of man's solitude. The "two sides of the cloth," evoked by the French title of the essays, *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, are thus closely linked together. —P.T.

2 That is to say, everybody.

3 That is to say, everybody.

V, Love of Life

At night in Palma, life recedes slowly toward the tune-filled café district behind the market: the streets are dark and silent until one comes upon latticed doorways where light and music filter through. I spent almost a whole night in one of these cafés. It was a small, very low room, rectangular, painted green and hung with pink garlands. The wooden ceiling was covered with tiny red light bulbs. Miraculously fitted into this minute space were an orchestra, a bar with multicolored bottles, and customers squeezed shoulder to shoulder so tight they could hardly breathe. Just men. In the middle, two square yards of free space.

Glasses and bottles streamed by as the waiter carried them to all four corners of the room. No one was completely sober. Everyone was shouting. Some sort of naval officer was belching alcohol-laden compliments into my face. An ageless

dwarf at my table was telling me his life story. But I was too tense to listen. The orchestra was playing tunes one could only catch the rhythm of, since it was beaten out by every foot in the place. Sometimes the door would open. In the midst of shouts, a new arrival would be fitted in between two chairs.¹

Suddenly, the cymbals clashed, and a woman leaped swiftly into the tiny circle in the middle of the cabaret. "Twenty-one," the officer told me. I was stupefied. The face of a young girl, but carved in a mountain of flesh. She might have been six feet tall. With all her fat she must have weighed three hundred pounds. Hands on her hips, wearing a yellow net through which a checkerboard of white flesh swelled, she was smiling; and each corner of her mouth sent a series of small ripples of flesh moving toward her ears. The excitement in the room knew no bounds. One felt this girl was known, loved, expected. She was still smiling.

She looked around at the customers, still silent and smiling, and wiggled her belly forward. The crowd roared, then demanded a song that everyone seemed to know. It was a nasal Andalusian tune accompanied by a strong three-beat rhythm from the drums. She sang, and at each beat mimed the act of love with her whole body. In this monotonous and passionate movement, real waves of flesh rose from her hips and moved upward until they died away on her shoulders. The room seemed stunned. But pivoting around with the refrain, seizing her breasts with both hands and opening her red, moist mouth, the girl took up the tune in chorus with the audience, until everyone stood upright in the tumult.

As she stood in the center, feet apart, sticky with sweat, hair hanging loose, she lifted her immense torso, which burst forth from its yellow netting. Like an unclean goddess rising from the waves, her eyes hollow, her forehead low and stupid, only a slight quivering at her knees, like a horse's after a race, showed she was still living. In the midst of the footstamping joy around her, she was like an ignoble and exalting image of life, with despair in her empty eyes and thick sweat on her belly ... Without cafés and newspapers, it would be difficult to travel.

A paper printed in our own language, a place to rub shoulders with others in the evenings enable us to imitate the familiar gestures of the man we were at home, who, seen from a distance, seems so much a stranger. For what gives value to travel is fear. It breaks down a kind of inner structure we have. One can no longer cheat—hide behind the hours spent at the office or at the plant (those hours we protest so loudly, which protect us so well from the pain of being alone).

I have always wanted to write novels in which my heroes would say: "What would I do without the office?" or again: "My wife has died, but fortunately I have all these orders to fill for tomorrow." Travel robs us of such refuge. Far from our own people, our own language, stripped of all our props, deprived of our masks (one doesn't know the fare on the streetcars, or anything else), we are completely on the surface of ourselves.

But also, soul-sick, we restore to every being and every object its miraculous value. A woman dancing without a thought in her head, a bottle on a table, glimpsed behind a curtain: each image becomes a symbol. The whole of life seems reflected in it, insofar as it summarizes our own life at the moment. When we are aware of every gift, the contradictory intoxications we can enjoy (including that of lucidity) are indescribable. Never perhaps has any land but the Mediterranean carried me so far from myself and yet so near.

The emotion I felt at the café in Palma probably came from this. On the other hand, what struck me in the empty district near the cathedral, at noon, among the old palaces with their cool courtyards, in the streets with their scented shadows, was the idea of a certain "slowness." No one in the streets. Motionless old women in the miradors. And, walking along past the houses, stopping in courtyards full of green plants and round, gray pillars, I melted into this smell of silence, losing my limits, becoming nothing more than the sound of my

footsteps or the flight of birds whose shadows I could see on the still sunlit portion of the walls. I would also spend long hours in the little Gothic cloister of San Francisco.

Its delicate, precious colonnade shone with the fine, golden yellow of old Spanish monuments. In the courtyard there were rose laurels, fake pepper plants, a wrought-iron well from which hung a long, rusty metal spoon. Passers-by drank from it. I still remember sometimes the clear sound it made as it dropped back on the stone of the well. Yet it was not the sweetness of life that this cloister taught me. In the sharp sound of wingbeats as the pigeons flew away, the sudden, snug silence in the middle of the garden, in the lonely squeaking of the chain on its well, I found a new and yet familiar flavor. I was lucid and smiling before this unique play of appearances.

A single gesture, I felt, would be enough to shatter this crystal in which the world's face was smiling. Something would come undone—the flight of pigeons would die and each would slowly tumble on its outstretched wings. Only my silence and immobility lent plausibility to what looked so like an illusion. I joined in the game. I accepted the appearances without being taken in. A fine, golden sun gently warmed the yellow stones of the cloister. A woman was drawing water from the well. In an hour, a minute, a second, now perhaps, everything might collapse. And yet this miracle continued. The world lived on, modest, ironic, and discreet (like certain gentle and reserved forms of women's friendship). A balance continued, colored, however, by all the apprehension of its own end.

There lay all my love of life: a silent passion for what would perhaps escape me, a bitterness beneath a flame. Each day I would leave this cloister like a man lifted from himself, inscribed for a brief moment in the continuance of the world. And I know why I thought then of the expressionless eyes of Doric Apollos or the stiff, motionless characters in Giotto's paintings.²

It was at these moments that I truly understood what countries like this could offer me. I am surprised men can find certainties and rules for life on the shores of the Mediterranean, that they can satisfy their reason there and justify optimism and social responsibility. For what struck me then was not a world made to man's measure, but one that closed in upon him. If the language of these countries harmonized with what echoed deeply within me, it was not because it answered my questions but because it made them superfluous.

Instead of prayers of thanksgiving rising to my lips, it was this Nada whose birth is possible only at the sight of landscapes crushed by the sun. There is no love of life without despair of life. In Ibiza, I sat every day in the cafés that dot the harbor. Toward five in the evening, the young people would stroll back and forth along the full length of the jetty; this is where marriages and the whole of life are arranged. One cannot help thinking there is a certain grandeur in beginning one's life this way, with the whole world looking on.

I would sit down, still dizzy from the day's sun, my head full of white churches and chalky walls, dry fields and shaggy olive trees. I would drink a sweetish syrup, gazing at the curve of the hills in front of me. They sloped gently down to the sea. The evening would grow green. On the largest of the hills, the last breeze turned the sails of a windmill. And, by a natural miracle, everyone lowered his voice. Soon there was nothing but the sky and musical words rising toward it, as if heard from a great distance. There was something fleeting and melancholy in the brief moment of dusk, perceptible not only to one man but also to a whole people.

As for me, I longed to love as people long to cry. I felt that every hour I slept now would be an hour stolen from life ... that is to say from those hours of undefined desire. I was tense and motionless, as I had been during those vibrant hours at the cabaret in Palma and at the cloister in San Francisco, powerless against this immense desire to hold the world between my hands.

I know that I am wrong, that we cannot give ourselves completely. Otherwise, we could not create. But there are no limits to loving, and what does it matter to me if I hold things badly if I can embrace everything? There are women in Genoa whose smile I loved for a whole morning. I shall never see them again and certainly nothing is simpler. But words will never smother the flame of my regret. I watched the pigeons flying past the little well at the cloister in San Francisco, and forgot my thirst. But a moment always came when I was thirsty again.

1 There is a certain freedom of enjoyment that defines true civilization. And the Spanish are among the few peoples in Europe who are civilized.

2 The decadence of Greek sculpture and the dispersion of Italian art begin with the appearance of smiles and expression in the eyes, as if beauty ended where the mind begins.

VI, The Wrong Side and the Right Side

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

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

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

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

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

If a cloud passes over the sun, the bright yellow of a vase of mimosas leaps from the shadow. This is enough: when a single gleam begins, I'm filled with a confused and whirling joy. It is a January afternoon that puts me this way, face

to face with the wrong side of the world. But the cold remains at the bottom of the air. Covering everything a film of sunlight that would crack beneath your finger, but which clothes everything in an eternal smile. Who am I and what can I do but enter into this play of foliage and light?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 That guarantee of freedom Barrès speaks of.

The end