

**“The World is Alive”**  
chapter excerpt from *Fever*

by: J.M.G Le Clézio (1940-)



**Paul Gauguin’s “D'où venons-nous ? Que sommes-nous ? Où allons-nous ?”**  
**“Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” (1897-98)**

**“The World is Alive”**  
(London: Penguin Books, 1965)

T H I S is what one has to do: one has to go out into the country, like a Sunday painter, with a big sheet of paper and a ball-point pencil. To choose a deserted spot, in a valley set between mountains, sit down on a rock, and look about one for a long time. And then, when one has had a good look, one must take the sheet of paper and draw, in words, what one has seen. You understand the thing is to write down the landscape, piece by piece, not overlooking anything; deliberately, methodically, one must map out this scrap of the earth’s surface, indicating the smallest pebble, the smallest clump of grass, charting its sights and smells, writing it all down, drawing the whole thing. Then, when one has finished and evening has come, one can go home. On the sheet, there, in this rectangle of paper measuring 21 X 27 cm., one has scrawled a patch of the earth. One has made the portrait of a few kilometers of light, of sounds and smells. One gas flattened them out as though on a postcard, so very easily. And now they’re yours, those kilometers, they’re saved from rotting away, forgotten; they will remain there, in your head, hammered in little signs, to all eternity. Or at any rate, as long as you’re alive.

At this point the mountains had frowned up everywhere, just anyhow; they filled the entire horizon, with tall, hard, furrowed masses and sharp peaks rising on all sides. Down below, the plain narrowed suddenly into a triangle, and chaos began. The bed of the stream, a sort of stony desert split down the middle by a trickle of water, was scattered with enormous rocks that had

fallen there as a part of an avalanche, a thousand years back. Between the rocks the smooth pebbles lay in waves, moulded by the currents and whirlpools of the last period of spate. On the far side of the stream a mountain rose steeply, higher than the others, standing at the mouth of the defile like a wall.

One approached this at the speed of an aeroplane, and little by little its details came to light, its countless asperities, the clusters of bushes clinging to the naked rock, the dried-up rivulets, the holes, the patches of scree; the wall ran the whole length of the valley, rising to a height of something like 1,800 feet, sheer, naked, and massive. The mountain was motionless, ponderous, standing alone against the blue sky where clouds drifted in shreds. It was like that. The line of the mountain climbed northwards in a gentle slope, then the slope became steeper and turned into a cliff; the first speak had two summits, with a dip between them. Behind the second peak the sun was glinting on a queer, white-painted object that looked just like a crucifix. Another dip, a rounded one this time, and one came to the second summit; not so high as the first, that consisted of a succession of broken rocks, fitting one into another. After that, the outline of the mountain ran down again into a sort of gorge, and then sloped gently up to the highest summit of all. This consisted of a single speak, a kind of broad obelisk, its flanks covered with trees which projected from its massive profile like a succession of little springs. On the other side, after you had crossed the empty, frozen space, the bald point that was culminating all the time, the peak fell down almost vertically into the valley. Half-way down, however, the fall was arrested by an outcrop of the mountain, a twist in its body, which ran off to the right and linked it to another block of stone. Just like the neck of some gigantic animal, the rocky mass curved away in a long, sinuous, heavy movement, and the crest of this misshapen wall seemed to be continually stretched in a terrible effort, worthy of a cataclysm.

And indeed they were still there, the traces of the ancient cataclysm that had moulded the earth. The boulders had shot up like rockets, amid torrents of scalding mud, lakes as big as seas had poured out through breaks in the lodes, and chasms had suddenly yawned, real upside down volcanoes, to swallow millions and millions of cubic kilometres of stone and marsh. One could still see the disaster in the form in which it had petrified centuries before; chaos was at rest there, tranquil, crushed beneath its own force, deathly faces rising desperately above the seeping tide of life: forests of waving bushes, a gentle, winding stream of turbid water, a drift of dust and sand covering the primeval ridges. The world was half buried under active silt, but one could tell it had been there. That once upon a time it had exploded, burst out with the full strength of its living bones, knocking over everything around it, to take the heavens by storm.

To the north, further upstream, the circle of mountains has close in. The space has become too small, and the blocks of stone have pushed up against one another. The river has to run through an awkward defile, full of shadows, and the mountain crests are lined up, overlapping one another.

On the left bank there's another mountain, a shapeless thing that overhangs the road. Its belly bulges out over the stream and the scrawny bushes clinging to its flanks twist their branches in a despairing effort to grow upwards.

Downstream, the circle ends with the flight of the mountains down to the hills, of the hills down to the plains, and of the plains down to the sea.

But it's within the circle that things happen. One has to go down into this chasm carved out of the earth, where a stream flows softly through olive groves, into this funnel which is full of peace and colour. Facing the wall-like mountain, counting the clumps of trees clinging to the livid rock; feeling the serrated crest against the sky and the rotary movement of the clouds moving forward, forward . . . Listen to the sounds and determine them; sniff the smells; be hurt by the sting of a horsefly; see the shapes of pebbles and grasses and not forget them; and above all, stare at the landscape.

At the foot of the mountains, as I said, there's a river; it's wide where it enters the circle, but narrows as it climbs up the sloping ground, with many windings. At first the water is clear, almost grey. It flows tirelessly towards the sea, making a steady sssshing sound, no movement to be seen on its surface. It glides like this, all in one piece, opaque yet translucent, reflecting nothing, through the middle of a pebbly plain. Other channels have been traced in its bed, and there are kinds of muddy pools stagnating in them, a refuge for mosquitoes. Nothing moves over the stones; the water may perhaps be flowing under the surface as well, filtering painfully between one pebble and the next, with bright drops that fall and fall incessantly, silently. On the surface the pebbles are laid down in long diagonal stripes, some pinkish grey, some mauve, some slate-coloured. Deep down, under the layers of stones, the rock lies every-where. The millennial fracture running along the ground and worn down, ceaselessly, by the imperceptible underthrust of the stream. For the stream is advancing, that's a certainty, water and pebbles, like a body, like a boa-constrictor in fragments. The top layers of pebbles are carried along by the current and rub against the middle layers, which rub against the bottom layers, which rub, in their turn, against the rocky wall. All this friction goes on slowly, very slowly. But a supernatural strength dwells in the river, and the water is pushing all the time, it has no respite it is tearing dust from the earth, crushing, emptying, gnawing away. The water flows on, eternal, briskly at the surface, drop by drop in the depths; when it has flowed, the sun shines down on the pebbles and evaporates it. Then it rises into the sky and trails there in long, white clouds; after that, the wind drives the clouds together, turns them grey, brown, blue, inky black; and then, suddenly, the sky bursts and the water falls down to earth again, flows towards the river, enters its bed, saturates everything, and begins again to push, to wear down, to gnaw away like a set of teeth.

Higher up, the river is squeezed between the mountain walls; here, the erosion has not yet widened the space between the rocky masses, and there are few pebbles. Along one bank there is a ribbon of land covered with reeds, along the other the steep, naked wall. The water flows at the foot of this wall, deep and blue. The rock goes straight down into the streams, with no intervening bank, and a black line running above water level; the mossy mark left by times of spate, no doubt, when the river is swollen by the autumn rains and writhes and swirls along beside the mountain.

Along the other bank, however, the rock was less tough, and has given way. Or perhaps it was the eccentric force of the current, because of the way the stream curves, that has thrown all the water against the other wall. At the river's edge, near the bend, reeds and grasses have found a hold in the sticky soil. The wind sends a ripple through them in passing, and the sun has warmed their stems all day. Birds shoot out of them, twittering, and zigzag up into the sky. Here, on this spongy soil, vegetation has managed to flourish. The living roots have grown in the earth, and the water has nourished them. Between the grasses and reeds the opposite wall can be seen,

barer than ever. Further on, lower down, where the river widens out and the stony plains begin, great, sad trees, fastened to the rock one knows not how, bend over towards the bed of the stream. And under their drooping foliage there are dark hiding-places; animals, snakes, toads, live in them, perhaps. Those shady holes must smell of decay, of dead leaves, and the air is surely cold. What if those holes conceal some loathsome corpse, all white and blue, its skin pierced by a hundred knife-stabs?

Near the sandy ground where the reeds grow, the hillside begins; covered with maize-fields and plots of waste ground, an old thing, even a kind of ruin, it slopes gently up to the road. The last few yards of ground are set with espaliers and planted with olives; there are a great many insects here. They rush through the air with funny creaking sounds, may-bugs, blow-flies, horse-flies, dragon-flies, mosquitoes, bumble bees, wasps, and long winged ants whose bodies quiver nervously. Along the ground, among the seeds, the little stones and the dry grass, a snake is gliding slowly; it stops now and then and sways its head from side to side. The plants stick up, motionless. One would say things were waiting, like this, for some awe-inspiring event. But nothing happens.

Planted stiffly on the terraced ground, the olive-trees are drying up. There is a silent, mysterious strength in them; it keeps them upright in the soil, it climbs up their contorted branches and spreads through their fibers. A determination to be a tree, perhaps, an implacable, intense, perfectly inanimate hardness. Inside the bark, in the narrow recesses of the wood, it works at its vertical task, perfuming, feeding, gently curving the edges of the little glossy leaves. It is in the earth, too, in the sucked-up earth that climbs into them through their roots and turns into the reinforced concrete of their branches, the dry, brittle cement that stretches their countless fingers well up towards the zenith. The stalks of the leaves point up very straight, as though straining towards an invisible sun, and the tree seems to be attached in this way to the breast of the electric clouds, so as to receive their lightning manna.

Along the edge of the road, between the blocks of stone, flowers have grown. A tall, slender stalk, covered with a kind of silvery down, with a cluster of buds and half open flowers at the top, and at the bottom a Z-shaped root with several hairs growing out of it. All along the grass the leaves lie open, offering their tiny hollows to the dust and wind. Between two arms growing from either side of the body and each ending in a huge leaf, there is a rosette of newborn leaflets, and flowers that have not yet opened. It is like a microscopic heart, crumpled, folded in on itself, where nothing is distinct. Something delicate and soft, a little green and grey ball, like a minute face, that is living withdrawn into itself, waiting until the time comes for it to open. At the top of the plant, at the end of a down-curved thread, a cluster of little white flowers, five-petalled stars with faintly yellow-tinted centres, clings in a bunch. From that, too, life must emerge, from these little hairy, scented nests. A muted, indolent life that carries you through the changing seasons, the regular succession of days and nights, the cool hours, the hot hours, the hours of dew, the hours of light, like that, without impatience, without desire.

Around the plant the world is circular, fixed, invisible; things exist without phenomena, or with phenomena so tiny that they're not worth mentioning. Things are there in blocks, in islets; they are far away; nothing comes to the plant, nothing enters into it, except through the fibres of its leaves or the filaments of its roots. Nothing communicates with it. And yet this is not death. On the contrary, it is a strange life, unrelated to the rest of the world. It is the scrap of the

common life, the little stick planted all alone in its earth, without bonds or chains. It is truth isolated, serene, the majesty of being oneself, naked, and alone, of being a crumb of reality and not even knowing that one is that crumb. Just as for the olive-trees, the bushes, the brambles, the thistles, time does not exist, noise does not exist, action does not exist; and this nothingness that is so full, so intense, is the initial, victorious truth of matter, of the thing plunged into the whole, living neither against others nor towards them, but for itself, for itself only.

In the valley this vegetable strength had taken hold everywhere; it was bursting the crust shells of the earth, breaking up the clouds in the depths of the soil, crawling, digging, seeking its outlet. The paths it was thus softly opening for itself in the powdery element were the evidence of its life and its power. Nothing stopped them. The world was really at the mercy of the plants and roots. For centuries they had been laboring this inert domain, gnawing away the rocks, dissolving the phosphate pitilessly, as a cluster of humble forces. A world without pain and without joy, a peaceful, murderous world, so close to death, yet so alive.

Through the forests of leaves and plants, rare insects were moving: a centipede went past a scrap of rotten wood; a giant ant, at least three centimeters long, walked along the edge of a wall. It had a squat, reddish body and a big black head with powerful mandibles. The ant advanced over the stones of the wall, its feet starting off landslides of dust-specks; it went up to a fly, which flew away at once; it patted a straw, stopped, and then, seized all of a sudden by some incomprehensible panic, began running like mad and vanished into a crack.

Other ants were walking along the road and on the branches of the trees; they were in incessant, groveling movement with a sort of meticulous fury, full of feet and antennae, something like animated paths.

Clumps of tough grass had managed to pierce the tarred surface of the road and were living at ground level, impossible to uproot despite repeated blows from the tyres of cars.

The wind blows, warm, noisy at times; it follows the gradient of the hillside, advances along the valley, moves slabs of coolness on its course, wrinkles the surface of the water in the stagnant ponds, carries off a wasp, rushes into a hole in the mountain. It will go on like this for a very long way, tight to the source of the river. For the air, too, is alive; it moves softly, stops, then blows harder. In the transparent, perfumed gas, now cold, now hot, bacteria are swept along; tiny animals with spherical bodies travel in a group on a speck of dust. Seeds fall from a tree or rain down from a dandelion. They will sink into the ground to join the drops of water and the grubs, and there they will decay slowly in the matrix of warmth, in the womb of the secret distended with torpor; when the moment arrives they will burst, and a new leaf-head will seek gently and powerfully for its particular route.

Here in this circle ringed with mountains, everything was to be found; countless animals, river, brooklets, the brooklets of brooklets, lumps of soil, plants, nothing was lacking; one was living in a series of concentric worlds that fitted perfectly inside one another: the world of giant ants, the world for beetles, the world for black masterwort, the world for reeds, the world for olive trees, for umbrella pines, or for chipped flint instruments; the world for the body of water, the world for earthworms, the world for flies; the world for snakes, the world for people, the world for dwarf wants. And yet this was merely appearance. For in point of fact there was only one world and all these lived together in it. But there was to be no sharing of it. Reality lay beyond, and always beyond. Vast, multiform, spherical. The peace of this valley was inexorable

torture, a pain which challenged the independence of every creature. There was no peace. There could be no peace. On the contrary, there was something mad, demented, durably cruel, which reigned within these beings. Neither grief nor enjoyment, but a terrible obstruction, an indescribable conflagration, a tempestuous ascent, full of dizziness and excitement. The violent sensation of existing, no doubt; like fear, which emptied you and at the same time filled you up. The idea of inhabiting, of being an inhabitant, here, in this valley, in this harsh, harsh site, and of never again being able to be otherwise; an inhabitant, unalterable, in front of this place of habitation; being an occupant, with might and main, in spite of oneself, far beyond oneself, almost in the future. And never able to do otherwise. The infinite malediction of being merely an inhabitant.

When you're close to the water's edge you see the great, silent movement going down towards the sea with a sound like a fountain. The water is deep, thick, steel-coloured. It flows along by the pebble beach in a single block, like a mass of ice. Inside there are fish, perhaps; glassy-eyed fish, busy watching their glaucous universe. Debris is drifting on the surface of the water, blade of grass torn from the banks, splinters of wood, roots. The soil, too, is crumbling, imperceptibly, silently; one doesn't see it break away, but one knows it is there, mixed with the water, dissolved into a thin grey substance.

In some places the stream has soaked into the bank, making muddy peninsulas, as it were; these gulfs are swarming with life: mosquitoes hovering just above the surface, midges, wasps, water-spiders. And there are thousands of these little pools up and down the stream. No lack of pebbles, either. They lie in heaps, one on top of another, in all shapes and colours some of them are surrounded by a thin white circle encrusted in the stone; others show signs of blows, or have holes through them. Polished by time, worn away by the river, they have come down from the highest mountain walls. They are crumbling away, a little more each day. In a thousand centuries, or sooner perhaps, the whole surface of the earth will have been reduced to sand.

The wind blows, and moves the dead leaves along the road. The bushes crackle. Lizards shoot across flat stones and then stop dead, only their throats palpitating. The thorns of a plant are quiet stiff, with points as sharp as finger-nails, and they are waiting. In the thickets, extreme wilderness prevails; branches are intertwined, leaves crackle, and pungent odours rise in the half-light; the insipid odour of sap, the smell of incipient fires, of crushed pulp. The stalks are green, they dazzle. Spiders' webs are stretched over hollows and between twigs, and the shadow is peopled with hairy blobs, tragic-eyed, always on the watch. Fatigue is heavy, it prowls low down, close to the ground, between the feet of the bushes. And a sort of milk-colour gradually invades the membranes of the plants, bends the slender stalks as it passes, covers the furrowed skin of the old laurel bushes with little cracks.

High in the sky, a buzzard is circling, unhurried. A bird's-eye view shows the earth as an immense, desolate chaos, a thing of ruins, where white torrents flow, thin as trails of spittle. A cry rises from a shrub, and one sees nothing; and unknown 'rak-rak-rak-rak' that catches at one's throat and stirs ripples of anxiety.

Still higher up, against the flat, blue-painted canopy of the sky, the clouds are still swimming. One of them is very long, with a kind of filiform tail that melts into the ether. They are constantly altering their shape, by imperceptible changes; they form and dissolve, assemble, separate, turn round the mountain peaks, fray out, are swallowed.

At the other end of the valley, where the stream disappears, there are two uprights, rather like gateposts, on each bank. Beyond them lies the unknown. The river must continue its winding course, and the banks must be green, no doubt, with more olive-trees and more reeds.

But here, in this enclosed corner, one would think everything has been daubed in; the clean air, the cool, the shade, the wind—it's all bare, incredibly bare. The contours of the ground are fixed, almost glazed. Between the mountain walls, lines run criss-cross, some of them slender, others heavy, for ever and ever. Nothing will move, nothing will change. The rocks are impassive, balanced, the trees and plants stand erect and a peopled silence reigns. The whole thing is an untidy weave, with knots, patches of colour, blackish blots. One has to live in there, one has to be one spot among others, a little speck of ink indicated by an arrow. In the heart of the show, an insect belonging here, a real grasshopper, kneeling in meditation. To see everything. To live everything.

A tiny hollow is your domain: around you the horizon is close in by gigantic banks with things like hairy tree-trunks growing on them. Down along the bumpy ground the air is hot, laden with scents, and wavers as it rises. Impossible to see any higher: a few centimeters above ground-level the atmosphere suddenly becomes opaque, traversed by blisters like a liquid surface. One lives no higher than the dust, a terrible weight shackles on to the cortex of the earth. Ah, if one had wings! But there's nothing to be done, one has to crawl over the slipping blocks of leaf-mould. And here there is no rest: the ground is alive, bubbling all the time, groaning, opening and shutting like a mouth; bubbles burst under your feet, slow, musical vibrations shake the earth's crust, and the waves of the air pass shrieking between the columns of the reeds. The vegetation is so thick that the sun's rays never touch the ground. The animals walking there are pallid, blind, groping. They are the prey of the other winged creatures that fly above their heads, searching the dark corners with voracious eyes beneath glossy shells. The earth is really terrible when you know it well. Monsters are not rare there, no, monsters are not rare there.

To the south, the valley flows its slope, the stream with its grey water flows down to the sea, placidly; the fall of the ground is almost imperceptible, and the mountains melt round the horizon into a sort of undulation with soft curves. Down there, close to the sea, the sky has taken on tallow and pink colours, and the clouds have completely dissolved into the atmosphere. Only a pearly curtain of mist reminds us that there is humidity in the air, that the pulverized drops of water are floating like specks of dust, miles above the ground.

This, far away from the dislocated cubes of the mountains, is the place where people live; they have built their houses on the sides of the hill, overlooking the river-mouth, and they live there, cook their meals, light fires in the middle of plots of waste land. The roads insinuate themselves through the thickets of trees, follow the windings of the streams, constantly cross and recross one another. Along these little white lanes cars follow one behind another, like columns of insects. The olive-trees are more numerous, and sometimes, from very high up, one discovers hexagons of ground with rows of maize-plants growing on them. The people live at the bottom of the great slope of the river. They lead their toilsome lives, bent over by the fall of the ground, in the open spaces where the sun shines from morning till night. Where they live there are no clouds and no walls of rock. Everything is gentle, shaken by a tranquil fever, and time passes quickly.

The trees must be fine ones, not stunted as they are up here; strong, prolific trees, heavy with fruits and leaves, with branches as regular as the prongs of a fork. Sounds and smells must multiply there, and there must always be an air full of promise for the human being, full of anxiety and hatred for the wild animals.

Here, in the circus made up of fissures and projections, stifling and yet free, the animals have nothing to fear. The earth and the rocks belong to them, and their cruel, significant games can be played out to the full. The light does not shine on them; the ants have no need to fear the terrible midday sun that dehydrates them and dries them up on a flat stone. Only water, cold and shade surround them.

The sun is rarely seen: it passes behind the mountain peaks, appearing and disappearing in accordance with the line of the crests. The light does not come from the sun, one would say; it seems to gush out all over the vault of the sky and rush down, a furious avalanche, into the hole, the valley. There it reverberates like an echo from the precipitous walls, it bounces back and flies in all directions, it collides with spears of rock-work, it bashes into the mouths of caves and against the sheets of pebbles. It slides over the quivering surface of the stream, is cut off and does not penetrate it. It covers everything as it passes, it glazes, coats everything. The boulders and grass-banks turn white, their hermetically-close shells are saturated with this pitiless light. It seems as though nothing had the power to stop this bleaching rain; for its very origin is unknown. There is no sunlight to quench, no moon to cover with clouds. The light is part of the violence of the landscape, and the earth, reduced to submission, can only offer itself to that light, immolating its wrinkled, smarting skin.

On the ground, the little reddish stones are shining like diamonds, and washed-out fire flies up in sparks from the pebbles laid out in rows along the riverside. The colours are burning, side by side; the green of the leaves, the pink of the river-bed, the blue of the sky, the white of the flower petals. Everything is hardened, stiffened, possessed. But is it really what is called light? For ever sounds and smells are imbued with it, it would seem; the wasps are flying with a noise as straight as a pencil stroke, and the pine-needles are giving off a zigzag, brittle, deep perfume, full of prickles and glue.

To left, to right, in front, behind, stand the mountains; it is they who have modified life in the valley in this way. They are responsible for this asperity and this mystery. For the mountains are living creatures; they have bodies, they have eyes, they breathe. Their vast domes are bellies, their crests bare the awe-inspiring traces of the orders they have given, once and for all, to everything around them: be hard, be hard. In the silence, in the emptiness, be hard. They rise up, bloated, sharp-pointed, massive, into the four corners of the sky; some of them even appear to be petrified in a dizzy equilibrium, seated, immovable, yet tilted in such a way that they ought to have fallen centuries ago, to have fallen softly in on themselves and dissolved into avalanches of sand. They have grown according to some confused plan, wide wrinkles of molten lava, waves of magma petrified in the act of rushing down-wards. They then they stayed like that, just as the pacified earth left them, grotesque and inaccessible. The harmony of silence is already at the heart of their contortions. Their life is no longer the life of movement, of a volcano, but a weight of simple calm and menace. Tons, millions of tons of stubborn, grandiose silence, a paralyzed anger that crushes everything, holds everything quelled beneath its plinth.

Between their pyramids is the other life, the life of the stream and valley, does the best it can do for itself; it nibbles away, it weathers down, year by year, century by century. But all the same it is defeated by eternity. The rock will be there long after the streams have evaporated and the bones of the animals have been reduced to nothing. When the planet has become a mere shriveled core, a target for meteorites, there will still be walls of rock, with faults, chasms, columns of implacable strength. There will still be mountains.

One needs to know that; for no aspect of the sinuous devouring life, no part of this wearing-down process in the valley-prison is extraneous to the power of the rock. Even the sand, even the flat pieces which break away from the mountain-sides during the rainy season, are full of a victor's strength. Here, life is not warfare: it is simply a natural movement of things, as a result of which every scarp of the landscape is inhaled by the rocky matter and mingles with it. There is a cold air-current that leads towards the ore, and objects tremble with the wild desire to enter, living, into the stone. The water of the stream, for example: it appears to be wasting the walls that hem it in. And yet *its life is the same as theirs*; the water is merely a rock, a form of rock, the unknown eternity of the mountain. The air, too, is made of rocks, is built up of broad prisms of limitless matter which has the power of enduring; differences of nature, aspect or finality, what do they matter? On earth, in the sky, in the water, all is stone, because all is but infinity, the glorious eternity of matter, the insolubility of what is and can never cease to be.

The mountain rears its vertical wall, so high that it seems impossible not to crash against it. From every peak a ridge runs down towards the valley in an almost straight line, with other lines slanting off from it and dicing the surface of the rock into irregular prisms. In the middle of the mountain, escaping from the denuded curve of a saddle, a ravine hurtles down the slope with cascades of stones and long black furrows full of repulsive shadow. On the face of this gigantic wall shrubs have grown in clumps, like seaweed clinging to an under-water rock. The stone is greyish-white, the seaweed is dark green, or sometimes red. It covers the whole visible surface of the mountain, and the odds are that it grows on the surfaces that are out of sight, as well; a regular pattern of rough flecks, twisting towards the summit in order to survive. The roots run along the face of the rock, visible, spreading out in star shapes like the claws of a bird of prey. Rain and trickles of dust filter, no doubt, through their scrawny branches, and when the rising sun shines on the rock-face it must send a fierce electrical heat, drawn straight from the precipitous wall, surging through the fibres of green wood. Some places are quite bare of vegetation; at the base of the mountain, to the left, a triangle of yellow earth has been dug out. Other ravines run down from the top of the mountain; the spring or autumn rains have traced their course, thin veins winding like roads, tremendous torrents of dust and stone hardened by months of drought.

The masses of rock have thrust up on all sides, dented, cracked, millions of years old; heavy, rugged backs, elephantine forms, swarming with life. The trees and animals are parasites, their roots and claws perpetually foraging the rock. Occasionally a thunderstorm settles on a peak, and the lightning shakes the columns of rock with its repeated attacks, while rain and mud run down their flanks like floods of voracious tears.

In the hollow places, the holes in the ravines, there isn't a soul; nothing remains except the deserted stone and air, alone in their contact. The cold wind slips past, vibrating; the rock never moves. The silence, there, is almost total, and movement has closed up into very had

crystals; there is nothing on the rock or underneath, not an animal, not a worm, not a blade of grass. Not a perfume quivering in the air. The soil is absent, and the sand that forms, a grain every six months, evaporates instantly, one doesn't know where to. Poverty, extraordinary poverty of the stone, a stone that is naked, immobile, serene, cold, amid passing time. Vertically there is nothing either; one might perhaps have to travel for millions of light years before meeting anything else.

All the stretches of rock were made in the same way: tons of hard flaking matter, scored with oblique striae. Tons of coolness and calm, laid down there, in front, one on top of another; between them, sometimes, there are valleys, lakes, little houses with tiled roofs in which people live among olive groves in soft shades of grey. That's possible. Roads, churches with villages round them, names of place, Marie, Saint-Dalmas-le-Selvage, Les Baux. Cow-byres, green meadows, ponds, brook in-habited by the fish. There may be pleasant things and delicate scents, here and there. But it's nothing compared with these immense walls, towering straight into the clear sky, these pallid mountains where nothing is tranquil, these mute darts hurled at infinity, these blocks of stone covered with angle and striae, where a sort of hatred echoes unceasingly, unaccountably, like a mystery of long-ago violence which may be the very nature of their upthrust out of the seething marshes of the earth.

If the circle of mountains was alive, it was with this kind of life; this unparalleled strength which had caused it to rise up and battle against the soft erosion of time. Like a crater, spreading round it the overflow of energy from the expanding world, the mountain had heaved its gigantic breath once and for all. It stood erect, all its matter utilized to the utmost, in opposition to nothingness, so that emptiness should not prevail. All round it, as the shadow moved, it projected its beam of broken lines and sent this surging in all directions, moved by a majestic fury. Everywhere it intervened. In front, it ran against one like an obstacle, it thrust one back; its white brow pushed towards you, stunned you. On the sides it hugged your chest and gradually smothered you, squeezing you in a vice. It was coldness, vertigo. And behind, it overhung you, it crushed you beneath its feet. More than vertical, it was toppling over on you; it was twisting the back of your neck and the dazzling burden, worse than an icy breath, was making your forehead sweat gently, unfolding before your uprolled eyes such visions of terror as came only to the defeated. Every-thing was going to fall; landslides were about to start off, avalanches would be thundering down, burying everything beneath tons of rubble; the mountain, so high that one could see no end to it, was an unimaginable disaster, bursting out on all sides like an active death of which one had to be the victim. One was nothing. One was a crumb, a frail, bending bramble, an old rust tin that a single pebble would flatten out.

Better still: the mountain was not falling; *one was falling one-self*. One was knocked down, pushed into the runnel of the bottomless pit; vanquished at the far end of a black shaft where the moist gleam of the stars reigned, and the pungent smell of the hammering rocks.

Lying face to the ground, one saw the flat hardness setting in; the rock crumbling where it stood, not into dust but into rough, grating slabs, as it were sharp weapons ready to chop up the flesh, to bury everything that was not themselves. All was defenestration.

And yet from this landscape, so beautiful and so powerful, a contrary passion was rising as well, tearing you apart and setting you erect, skywards. The brute strength, heavy as concrete, entered into you and made a mountain of you. Ascending lines planted themselves in your limbs.

And you were suddenly imbued with a stirring, direct, architectural intoxication, you positively took off for the upper layers of the atmosphere and went on rising, gorged with oxygen. Facing the rampart, shooting up like an arrow. A longing to grasp everything, to hold everything in your arms. In the silence, in the cold. A longing to eat. To have stone in your stomach.

The trees and animals were no longer viable. Instead there was an absolute lunar landscape, full of craters and peaks, covered with faults and striations, a sea of pyramids. Spread over the entire surface of the ground, you are suddenly open like a calyx, you are holding up the vault of the sky with your outstretched arms.

You are no longer yourself. You have ceased to live. Have you ever lived, in fact? Nothing counts here any longer except the rock, the impassive rock, the rock laid upon rock, the whetted, serene, victorious stone. The years go by. Water may seep out, leaves may scratch the soil in passing. That's your skin, it is over your body they are advancing. The wind may hollow the sand, at the cliff edge, into soft, round shapes. It's nothing. You will win. Time is on your side. In mineral crystals it is hardening, time that was once so liquid. In the permanently open space, where the air is as though vitrified, the purity of slowness reigns, Majesty. Long minutes, long seconds. Years. Centuries. Day, night; night, day. Little cracklings, as though of vertebrae. Little landslides. It's nothing. Here, time is unhewn marble. The impulses that are felt are never resolved. They are stopped before that, for stopping is the perfect form of their existence. Slowness of the rocks. Virtue of the rocks. Little stones, enormous stones. Life is a cube.

Another time one would stand facing the sea, in an immense sunset. Night would fall softly, with slow withdrawals of colours; they would sink below the horizon, one by one, following the route taken by the ball of fire. Ash-grey shades began to cover the sky, and the shadows turned blue, then mauve, then black. The cape jutted out into the sea, and the bay suddenly lit up with street lamps. A sort of peace could be heard there, too: it had scraping sounds in it, the splash of waves on the shingle, rubbing of bats; wings, the monotonous sizzling of sound of the electric standards.

The sea was flat, wide. Rays of light, coming in from some undetectable source, struck the crest of each wave and made it sparkle. The horizon was bare and stiff and queer red haloes hovered in the west, close to the atmosphere.

Under the sea, beneath the expanse now turning green, the whirlpools and reefs were innumerable. Silently they were rendering the layers of water, devouring space; but a sort of opaque paralysis enfolded them, slipping into their crevices, intruded into their wounds and kept them motionless. There, hundreds of yards down, in muted listlessness, life had its roots too. Fish swam blindly round and round near the mouths of caverns. For them it was always night. Never did the sun set amid flaming clouds. Never did the moon shine with frozen brilliance in the centre of the darkness. Light and darkness had intermingled below the liquid surface, and there was reigned perpetually a sort of blurred glimmer, coming from nowhere and never lighting up anything.

But on land one didn't suspect that. Standing on a sticky rock a few inches from the fringe of the sea, one could only see masses of black matter, probing into the liquid sphere. The sheet of silence was purplish-blue, moving its tiny wrinkles imperceptibly; it was undulating smoothly, swaying forward, breaking, returning, spreading out like a patch of oil, retreating a

little, then advancing again, without fatigue, without end, with a sort of melancholy, mawkish, inscrutable obstinacy.

This was motion but not movement; the waves advanced landwards from the furthest horizon, but so to speak without moving. It was motion in the heart of immobility, the sound of silence, the aggression of flat, lethargic zones, nothing more.

To the left the bay ended with a tongue of land, almost transparent amid the fluidity of the atmosphere, which sloped gently down into the sea. On the cape, umbrella pines were planted, their complicated outlines silhouetted against the mild sky. Along the shore were invisible creeks, hidden by the dark-ness, and others which gleamed faintly in the light of the street lamps, crowded with stranded boats and huts.

While night was falling and the shadows thickened, the heat seemed to be gathering towards the liquid surfaces, round the bay. Big crimson patches, like pools of blood, floated in the trough of the waves not far from the shore. Other blisters, sheets of fuel oil, pools of petrol, were drifting along, continually changing shape, glinting or being temporarily extinguished, with the indolent gesticulations of jellyfish. Shoals of fish broke surface, and a few bellies shone for an instant. A thick, heavy smell, pungent yet sweet, rose from the deserted waves. The wind carried it in puffs to the shore, and one might have taken it for the breath of some animal. The night, no doubt about it, had sunk down into the sea; it was awakening mysterious impulses, it was kneading the flabby flesh of the lampreys, dilating the mouths of the anemones. One heard the same lapping sound all the time; but by listening attentively, one could make out a great, confused clamour rising from the depths of the water, a deep, nasal chant, the bursting of bubbles, the hissing of branchiae, the yawning of shells; objects where undoubtedly growing larger, under the weight of the darkness. The heat, stored up all through the day, could at last escape from the depths, and the invisible tumult was swelling the liquid matter like a tide.

On land, the last reddish flares were fading out along the horizon. Three rocks standing in a row near the shore still had tiny crimson star on their brows. The three wet gleams would shine for a few minutes alone in the darkness, and then abruptly go out, and nothing would be left. Round the open bay, despite the white perforations of the street lamps, darkness was continuing its advance. It was steadily taking away the colour from things; the grains of sand on the beach, at one time many-coloured, were turning grey; they were melting into one another, liquefying, become gaseous. The earth had been hard and burning in the sunshine; now it was going to mingle with the air. The water was going to climb up its slopes, to invade the hollows between the dunes, to flow along the little valleys; the rich, salty, smooth liquid would filter into the fields. It would rise into the branches of the trees, it would enter the darkened houses. It would even get into men throats, it would invade their veins and muscles, it would nourish them gently while they slept and knew nothing about it.

Near the cape a cemetery was resting in the darkness, surrounded by a high stone wall and cypress hedges. Under the marble roof of a superb mausoleum erected into the memory of someone unknown, an owl had built her nest; she kept watch there every night, breathing with the hoarse, regular sound of a sleeping chest, and men all had their different legends about her; sinister tales of people buried alive, of vampires or necrophagi.

In the distance, in the opposite direction from the surface of the sea, the hills rose gently skywards. Invisible in the night, they lifted up their chaos of vineyards and pine-woods. The

hollows between their ridges were purple-coloured and silent, and the cold air crawled over the under growth, leaving dewy tracks behind it. In the tall grass somewhere towards the centre of the cape, a crazy grasshopper was uttering its saw-toothed call. A dog was barking in the garden of the villa, its discordant cries awakening long echoes all round.

Breathed upon by the sea, the tangled branches of the laurel bushes were gradually retracting and their colourless flowers were closing their petals. Lethargy was rising from every point of the land, an unerring delicacy which was entering into all the leaves and holding them rigid. And yet, it was not sleep; sleep was not current here. Everywhere, beings and objects were beginning to crackle, to stir. The earth buried in darkness was trembling imperceptibly, with the kind of shivering of vermin at work. The clamours were innumerable; the black odours were multiplying in every corner; they were emerging from burrows, from hiding-places under the carpets of leaves, like so many reptiles.

The regular spectacle of daytime had been destroyed. No more lines, no more colours, no more relief. The bay was constantly changing shape, at times it was so wide that one couldn't see across it, at other times it was so narrow, its curve closing in like a circle. The cape either advances far out into the sea, or drew back until it was no more than a ridiculous stump. The outlines of the trees were dancing. The rounded hilltops, stretching away out of sight, were always changing their position or softening like fleece; sometimes three hummocks would vanish simultaneously, over towards the skyline, and one would see a big black hole dug out of the earth.

As for the sea, there were moments it suddenly rose up on the horizon vertically, like a rampart; or else it took on the appearance of the corrugate iron, and colours began to shimmer miraculously on it--clusters of rubies, golden iridescence, deep, violet purples gazing out.

The landscape was trembling like this, tirelessly composing and demolishing itself. The earth's calm, ecstatic beauty was made up of these orgies and metamorphoses. One couldn't prevent them. One had to be content with staring, eagerly, with all one's eyes. Standing on this little promontory with the noise of the surf at one's feet, one had to understand it all, to love it all, just for a second. The immense curve of the bay. The cape. The hills and the mountains. The indelible sky. The reflections of the street lamps, and the red gleam of the light-house, going out, lighting up again, going out, lighting up, going out, lighting up. The muffled smell and the veils of shadow. The fierce cries of animals. The twinkling houses. The menacing clumps of trees, where two or three mysteries lie concealed. The invisible air. The asthmatic breathing of the necrophagous owl in the cemetery. The strata of fat earth, populated by torpid insects. The flight of the blind bats. The shimmering of the stars, of the millions of stars sunk deep in the sky, so far away that it's really not worth thinking about. The ripples that move forward of their own accord over the deep water, over the black water, over the water that is a horizontal chasm in which the dizzy mind of man is lost, over the boundless liquid that hides abysses, over the great, enteral surface, so flat, deserted, where night and day are mixed together like seeds of two different qualities.

There you are. The world is alive, like that in tiny, hard blows, in slidings, in seepings. In the shrubs, in the caves, in the inextricable tangle of plants, it sings, with the light or with the shadows, it lives and explosive, restless life, heavy with cata-clysms and murders. We must live

with it, like that, every day, lying with cheek to the ground and listening ears, ready to hear all the galloping and all the murmuring. Thrust out nerves right into the earth like roots and draw nourishment from its martial, incoherent strength; we must drink long draughts from its spring of life and death, and remain invincible.