AUCA Summer Reading Assignment for Freshmen

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Jamila

by Chingiz Aitmatov

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Prepared for the Internet by Iraj Bashiri, 2002

Once again I find myself in front of the small painting in a simple frame. Tomorrow morning I leave for the village, and I gaze long and intently at the canvas, as if it can give me a word of advice for the journey ahead.

It has never been exhibited. Moreover, when relatives from home come to visit, I make sure it is out of sight. There is nothing to be ashamed of, though it is not really a work of art. It is as plain as the earth depicted in it.

The background is a patch of bleak autumn sky with the wind chasing fast-moving skewbald clouds over the far mountain range. The russet wormwood-covered steppe, a road black and damp from the recent rains, and the dry broken bushes of needle glass crowding at the roadside form the foreground. The footprints of two travellers follow a washed-out dirt road. Their tracks appear ever fainter as the road dwindles in the distance. It seems that if they were to take another step, they would disappear behind the frame. One of them.... However, I'm forestalling events.

It all happened when I was still a boy. It was the third year of war. Somewhere far away, at Kursk and Orel, our fathers and brothers battled the enemy, while we, lads of fifteen, worked on the collective farm. Our skinny young shoulders had to carry the full brunt of a grown man's job. Harvest time was the hardest of all. We were away from home for weeks on end, spending our days and nights in the field, at the threshing-floor, or on the road to the railway station, delivering the grain.

Driving my empty trap back from the station on one such scorching

day, when our scythes seemed red-hot from reaping, I decided to stop off at home.

At the very end of the street, on a hillock near the ford, are two houses with a stout adobe wall around them and tall poplars growing beyond the wall. These are our houses. For many years our families have lived side by side. I was from the Big House. I had two brothers, both older than I, both bachelors, both away, at the front, and there had been no word from either for it long time.

My father was an old carpenter. After, saying his mourning prayer at dawn he went to work in the carpentry shop in the common yard, where he stayed till late in the evening.

My mother and little sister remained at home.

Our close relatives lived in the neighbouring yard, known to the villagers as the Small House. Our great-grandfathers or great-great-grandfathers were brothers, but I call them close relatives because we lived as one family. It had been so since the time our people had been nomads, when our great-grandfathers used to break camp and round up their cattle together. We kept this tradition alive. When our village was collectivised, our, fathers built their houses side by side. Actually, we were all fellowtribesmen--the whole of Aralskaya Street, stretching the length of the village to the river, was inhabited by our kinsfolk.

Soon after we joined the collective farm, the master of the Small House died, leaving a widow and two small sons. According to the old custom of tribal law which was still adhered to in the village at the time, it was forbidden to let a widow who had sons leave the tribe, and it was therefore agreed that my father should marry her. His duty to the spirits of his ancestors compelled him to do this, for he was the deceased man's closest relative.

That is how we came to have a second family. The Small House was considered an independent household with its own grounds and its own cattle, but, actually, we lived together.

The Small House had also sent two sons off to war. The eldest, Sadyk, had left soon after he married. We received letters from them, though they were few and far between.

Thus there remained in the Small House the mother, whom I called *kichine*--younger mother--and her daughter-in-law, Sadyk's wife. Both worked on the collective farm from morning till night. My younger mother was kind, complacent and mild-tempered; she kept up with the younger women in everything, be it in digging the irrigation ditches or in watering the fields. Fate had rewarded her with a hard-working

daughter-in-law. Jamila was a good match for her mother-in-law; she was indefatigable and nimble, though of a very different temperament.

I loved Jamila dearly. And she loved me. We were great friends, yet we did not dare call each other by our first names. Had we been from different families, I would have certainly called her Jamila. However, since she was the wife of my eldest brother, I had to call her *djene,* while she, in turn, called me *kichine bala*--little boy--though I was far from little and there was a very small difference in our ages. Such was the custom of our villages: daughters-in-law called their husband's younger brothers *kichine bala.*

My mother managed both households. My little sister, a funny girl with braids tied with strings, helped her. I shall never forget how hard she worked during those difficult years. It was she who took the lambs and calves of both houses to pasture; it was she who gathered dung and dry branches, to always have a supply of fuel in the house. It was she, my snub-nosed little sister, who brightened my mother's days of loneliness, distracting her from the gloomy thoughts of her sons who were missing in action.

Our large family owed the prevailing spirit of concord and plenty to my mother's efforts. She was the full-fledged mistress of both houses, the keeper of the home. She had come into the family of our nomad grandfathers as a young girl and had always revered their memory, ruling the families justly. The wisdom, fairness and efficiency with which she ran her home gave her a position of consequence in the village. At home Mother was in charge of everything. To tell the truth, our fellow-villagers never considered my father the head of the family. They would often say: "Ah, don't go to the *ustaka* (that is our term of respect for a craftsman), all he knows about is his axe. Their Eldest Mother is in charge of everything. You'll make out much better by going to her."

Despite my young years, I had a say in our household .affairs, which was admissible only because my elder brothers had gone off to war. More often in jest, but sometimes quite seriously, I was called "the supporter of the two families", the protector and bread-winner. I was proud of this and felt a deep sense of responsibility. Besides, my mother encouraged this feeling of responsibility. She wanted me to become a good farmer, smart and ambitious, not a man like my father, who spent his days planing and sawing away in silence.

Well then, I pulled my trap up in the shade of a willow, loosened the traces and, heading towards the yard, spied Orozmat, our

teamleader. He was on horseback with his crutch tied to the saddle as always. My mother stood beside him. They were arguing. As I came closer, I heard my mother say:

"Never! Is there no fear of Allah in you? Who ever heard of a woman delivering sacks of grain in a trap? No, my good man, you leave my daughter-in-law out of this, let her work as she's been working. I never see the light of day as it is. You try to keep house in two houses! It's a good thing my daughter's big enough to help now. I haven't been able to straighten out for a week, my back hurts so. It's as if I've been making felt. And look at the corn, drying on the stalks without water!" she spoke heatedly while tucking the end of her turban under her collar, a sign that she was angry.

"Can't you understand?" Orozmat cried in despair, as he lurched forward. "Do you think I'd ever come to ask you if I had a leg instead of this stump? Why, I'd toss the sacks in the trap myself and whip on the horses like I used to! I know it's not a woman's job, but where am I to get the men? That's why we've decided to ask the soldiers' wives. You don't want to let your daughter-in-law go, but I can't get the farm chairman off my neck. The soldiers need bread, and we're disrupting the plan. Can't you understand that?"

I came up to them, dragging my whip along the ground. When the teamleader noticed me, he beamed, apparently struck by a thought.

"Well, if you're so concerned about your daughter-in-law, her *kichine bala* here won't let anyone get fresh with her." And he pointed to me happily. "Have no fear! Seit is a fine lad. It's boys like him, our real bread-winners, who always see us through."

My mother did not hear him out.

"My goodness, just look at yourself, you tramp!" she wailed, pointing to me. "And your hair is as long as a mane! Your father's a fine one--he can't even find time to shave his son's head."

"Well, then, let the boy rest at home with his parents today and have his head shaved," Orozmat said in tone with my mother. "Seit, you stay here today, feed your horses, and tomorrow morning we'll give Jamila a trap. You'll work together. But mind, you'll be responsible for her! Now, don't worry, *baibiche,* Seit will take good care of her. What's more, I'll send Daniyar along with them. You know him, he's a harmless fellow, the one who was just demobilised. The three of them can deliver the grain to the station, and then who'll ever dare approach your daughter-in-law? Am I right? What do *you* say, Seit? We want to make Jamila a driver, but your mother won't hear of

it. *You* try to persuade her."

I was flattered by Orozmat's praise and by the fact that he had consulted me as he would a grown man. Besides, I immediately visualised how nice it would be to drive to the station with Jamilla. Putting on a very grave look, I said to my mother:

"Nothing'll happen to her, there are no wolves along the way."

And, casually spitting through my teeth like a regular driver, I sauntered off with an air of importance, dragging the whip behind me.

"Listen to him!" my mother cried in surprise. She,seemed somehow pleased, but immediately added in an angry voice: "What do you know about wolves, you wise acre!"

"Well, who should know if not he--he's the supporter of the two families, and you can be proud of him!" Orozmat said, fearing lest my mother turn stubborn again.

But my mother did not object. She suddenly looked tired and said, sighing deeply:

"He's far from that. He's still a child, but even so, he's at work day and night. Allah alone knows where our dear *djigits* are. Our houses have become as empty as forsaken camps.

I was now beyond earshot, so my mother's following words were lost on me. I lashed at the corner of the house, raising a cloud of dust, and strutted towards the door without even returning my sister's smile. She was making dung cakes for fuel in the yard, slapping them against her palms. At the entrance I squatted and slowly washed my hands, pouring the water from a pitcher. Then I entered the room, drank a cup of sour milk and set a second cup on the window-sill, crumbling a chunk of bread into it.

My mother and Orozmat were still in the yard; they were no longer arguing, but were talking calmly in soft voices. They must have been speaking of my brothers. My mother kept wiping her eyes with her sleeve, nodding her head absently at his words. Orozmat was apparently consoling her. My mother looked off into the distance and over the tree-tops, as if her clouded gaze would come upon her sons there.

Preoccupied with her sad thought, she seemed to have finally agreed to Orozmat's suggestion. He was pleased at having achieved his aim, whipped his horse and trotted out of the yard.

Needless to say, neither my mother nor I then knew what all this would lead to.

I had no doubt that Jamila would be able to handle a two-horse

trap. She was a good horsewoman, for she was the daughter of a horse-breeder from the mountain village of Bakair. Our Sadyk was also a horse-breeder. It was said that at the spring races he could not overtake Jamila. Perhaps that was so, but they said that after that the insulted Sadyk had kidnapped her. Others, however, said it was a love match. Be that as it may, they had only been married for four months. Then war broke out and Sadyk was called up.

I don't know why--perhaps it was because Jamila had herded horses with her father from childhood on, for she was his only child, both son and daughter to him--but there was something masculine in her, a sharpness and at times even rudeness, and she worked just as doggedly as a man would. She got along well with the other women, but if they criticised her undeservedly she would never let them get the better of her; there were even times when she had pulled another woman's hair in anger.

The neighbours would come to complain:

"What kind of a daughter-in-law do you have? She's only just come to live with you, and her tongue's already a mile long! No respect and no modesty!"

"I'm glad she's like that!" my mother would answer. "Our daughter-in-law tells a person the truth right to his face. That's better than being two-faced. Your daughters pretend they're sweet, though their sweetness is like a rotten egg: nice and smooth on the outside, but you have to hold your nose if you look inside."

My father and my younger mother were never as strict and exacting towards Jamila as a mother- and father-in-law should be. They were good to her and loved her and their one wish was that she be faithful to Allah and to her husband.

I understood them. Having seen four sons off to war, they found consolation in Jamila, the only daughter-in-law of the two houses, and that is why they were so concerned with her well-being. But I could not understand my own mother. She was not a person who could simply extend her love to someone. My mother was domineering and harsh by nature. She lived according to her own set of rules and was never untrue to them. For instance, with the coming of spring she never failed to pitch the old nomad's tent my father had made in his youth and to burn juniper branches in it. She brought us up to be hardworking, to respect our elders and demanded absolute obedience from every member of the family.

From the very first Jamila had not been the accepted kind of

daughter-in-law. True enough, she respected her elders and obeyed them, but she never shrank before them. True, nor did she whisper maliciously behind their backs, as other young daughters-in-law did. She always said what she thought and was never afraid to express her opinions. My mother often supported her and agreed with her, but she always had the last say.

I believed that she regarded Jamila, with her frankness and fairness, as an equal to herself and secretly dreamed of some day making her as powerful a mistress and *baibiche*--the keeper of the home--as she herself.

"Praise Allah, my daughter, that you have come into such a well-knit and blessed family," my mother would repeat. "That's your luck. A woman's happiness lies in bearing children and living in a house of plenty. Allah be praised, you will have everything that we old people have acquired: we won't take it with us, you know. But happiness is the lot of those who keep their honour and conscience clean. Remember this and take care!"

However, there was something about Jamila that bothered her two mothers-in-law: she was too high-spirited. It was as if she were still a child. She would suddenly burst out laughing loudly and happily for no reason at all. And when she returned from work, instead of walking sedately, she would dash into the yard, leaping over the irrigation ditch. Then, for no apparent reason, she would begin hugging and kissing first one mother-in-law and then the other.

Jamila loved to sing. She was always humming something, unembarrassed by the presence of her elders. Obviously, this was not in keeping with our set village conception of a daughter-in-law's behaviour. But both mothers-in-law consoled themselves by saying that Jamila would settle down in time, for hadn't they all been like that when they were young? As far as I was concerned, there was no one better than Jamila in the whole world. We had lots of fun together, chasing each other round the yard and laughing and laughing.

Jamila was very pretty. She was well built and graceful, with straight hair braided in two tight and heavy plaits; she tied her white kerchief at an angle of her forehead; it was very becoming this way and striking against her dark complexion. When she smiled, her black almond eyes lit up mischievously, and when she suddenly broke into one of the naughty village ditties, her lovely eyes became as naughty.

I often noticed that the young *djigits*, and especially men back from the fighting lines, were much taken by her. Jamila always enjoyed a

joke, but she was quick to check anyone who took liberties. Nevertheless, I always resented this. I was jealous of her, as younger brothers are jealous of their sisters, and if I noticed a young man near her, I did my best to interfere. I would bristle and look at him with hatred, as if to say: "Watch your step. She's my brother's wife, and don't think there's no one to protect her!"

At such moments I would butt into the conversation with exaggerated familiarity in an effort to ridicule her suitors. Failing to do so, I would lose my self-control, ruffle my feathers and retreat in a huff.

The young men would burst out laughing:

"Just look at him! Why, she must be his *djene.* Isn't that something! Why, we'd never have guessed it!"

I tried to control myself, but would feel my ears burning treacherously, while tears of hurt sprang to my eyes. But Jamila, my *djene,* understood me. Holding back the laughter that was bubbling up inside of her and assuming a serious expression, she would ask saucily:

"And do you think that a *djene* is to be had for the asking? Maybe that's how it is where you come from, but not here! Come on, *kichine bala,* we won't pay any attention to them!" And, showing off before the young men, Jamila would throw back her head arrogantly, shrug in defiance, and smile to herself as we walked off together.

There was both annoyance and pleasure in that smile. Perhaps she was thinking: "Silly boy! If ever I wish, do you think anyone will be able to hold me back? The whole family could spy on me, but I'd still do as I please!" At such times I was contritely silent. Yes, I was jealous of .Jamila, I worshipped her, I was proud that she was my *djene, I* was proud of her beauty and her independent, reckless nature. We were the best of friends and had no secrets from each other.

During the war years there were very few men left in the village. Taking advantage of this, some youths behaved quite insolently, treating the women with scorn, as if to say: "Why bother with them, if all you have to do is wag a finger to have anyone you want come running?"

Once at haying, Osmon, our distant relative, began to get fresh with Jamila. He was one of those who thought no woman could resist him. Jamila pushed his hand away angrily and rose from the ground where she had been resting in the shade of a haystack.

"Leave me alone!" she said dismally and turned away. "Though what can one expect from young stallions like you!"

Osmon lay sprawled beneath the haystack, his moist lips curled back scornfully.

"A cat will always scorn the meat that's hanging too high. Why are you playing hard-to-get? I'll bet you're only too eager, so why be high and mighty about it?"

Jamila spun round.

"Maybe I am! But that's our lot, and you're a fool if you can think of nothing better to do than laugh. I'll be a soldier's grass widow for a hundred years and still won't ever want to spit on the likes of you--you sicken me! If not for the war, I'd like to see who'd even look at you!"

"That's what I say! It's wartime, and you're going crazy here without your husband's whip!" Osmon smirked. "Ah, if you were *my* woman, you'd talk differently."

Jamila was about to jump at him, but she said nothing, realising that he was not worth quarrelling with. Her look was full of hatred. Then, spitting in disgust, she picked up her pitchfork and stalked off.

I was on a wagon behind the haystack. When Jamila saw me, she turned away sharply, understanding the state I was in. I felt as though I, and not she, had been insulted, I had been disgraced. I reproached her, distressed.

"Why do you have anything to do with such people? Why do you even talk to them?"

Jamila was as black as a cloud the rest of the day. She did not speak to me and did not laugh as always. When I drove the wagon up to her, she swung her pitchfork into a stack, lifted it and carried it ahead of her, hiding her face in order to prevent me from speaking of the terrible hurt she was concealing. She would thrust the stack into the wagon and hurry back for another. The wagon filled up quickly. As I drove off, I turned back and saw her, lost in thought, leaning dejectedly on the fork handle. Then, with a start, she resumed her work.

After we had loaded the last wagon, Jamila stood looking at the sunset for a long while, seeking to have forgotten everything else in the world. There, beyond the river, at the very edge of the Kazakh steppe, the languid harvest sun blazed like the mouth of a burning *tandyr*. It was sinking slowly beyond the horizon, touching the loose clouds with crimson and casting its last rays on the purple steppe, already shaded in the dells with the blue of early twilight. Jamila looked at the sunset, enraptured, as if she were witnessing a miracle. Her face was aglow with tenderness, her parted lips smiled gently, like a child's. And then, as if in answer to the unspoken reproaches still at the tip of my tongue,

she turned and said, continuing our conversation, as it were:

"Don't think about him, *kichine bala,* don't pay any attention to him! He isn't worth it." Jamila fell silent, watching the fading edge of the sun. Then, with a sign, she continued thoughtfully: "How can such as Osmon know what's in a person's soul? No one can know that. Perhaps there isn't one such a man in the whole world."

While I was turning the horses round, Jamila ran off to a group of women, and I could hear their happy, ringing voices. It is difficult to explain the change that came over her--perhaps the sunset had put her mind at ease, or perhaps she felt happy after the day's work. I sat high on the hay wagon and looked at Jamila. She tore her white kerchief from her head and dashed after her girlfriend across the mowed field, her arms flung far apart, the wind flapping the hem of her dress. Suddenly I felt sad no longer. "Why think of silly old Osmon!"

"Giddyap!" I cried, whipping the horses.

That day I followed the team-leader's advice and waited for my father to come home and shave my head. Meanwhile, I sat down to answer my brother Sadyk's letter. Even in this there were unwritten laws: my brothers addressed their letters to my father, the village postman gave them to my mother, while it was my duty to read and answer them. Before even opening the letter, I knew exactly what Sadyk had written, since his letters were as alike as lambs in a flock. Sadyk always began with wishing good health to all, and then went on to say: "I'm sending this letter by mail to my relatives living in the sweet-smelling, blossoming land of Talas: to my dearly beloved, highly esteemed father Djolchubai. . . ." Then he enumerated my mother, his mother and all the rest of us in strict order. There followed the indispensable questions about the health and well-being of all the *aksakals of* our tribe and our close relatives, and only in the very end, as if in haste, Sadyk would add: "And give my regards to my wife Jamila."

Naturally, when one's father and mother are living, when the village is full of *aksakals* and close relatives, it is out of the question and even improper to mention one's wife first, to say nothing of addressing a letter to her. Not only Sadyk, but every self-respecting man was of the same opinion. This was never questioned, it was an established custom, and, far from being a topic for discussion, we never even stopped to wonder whether it was right or not. After all,

each letter was such a long-awaited and happy event.

My mother would make me read the letter several times. Then, with pious devotion, she would take the sheet of paper in her work-hardened hands, holding it as awkwardly as if it were a bird ready to fly away, and with difficulty her stiff fingers would finally fold the letter into a triangle.

"Ah, my dear ones, we shall preserve your letters like a talisman!" she would say in a voice quivering with tears. "He asks how his father and mother and relatives are. What ever can happen to us? *We're* at home, in our native village! But how are you there? Just send us a single word saying that you're alive. That's all, we don't need anything more than that."

My mother would gaze at the triangle for a long while. Then she would put it in a little leather pouch together with the other letters and lock it away in the trunk.

If Jamila happened to be home at the time, she was permitted to read the letter. I noticed that she always blushed as she picked up the triangle. She scanned the lines greedily, but as she read on, her shoulders sagged and the fire slowly drained from her cheeks. Frowning and leaving the last lines unread, she would return the letter to my mother with such cold indifference that it seemed she was merely returning something she had borrowed.

My mother apparently understood her daughter-in-law in her own way and tried to cheer her:

"What's the matter?" she would say, locking the trunk. "Look how depressed you are, instead of being happy! Do you think your husband's the only one who's gone away to be a soldier? You're not the only one in trouble. The whole nation is bleeding. You should bear up with the rest. Do you think there are girls who aren't lonely and don't miss their husbands? Be lonely if you like, but don't let it show, keep your feelings to yourself."

Jamila said nothing, but her sad and stubborn expression seemed to say: "Oh, Mother, you don't understand a thing!"

This time, as before, Sadyk's letter was postmarked "Saratov". He was in a hospital there. Sadyk wrote that with Allah's help he would be home by autumn. He had written of this before and we were all looking forward eagerly to the coming reunion.

In the end, I did not remain at home that day, but went to the threshing-floor where I usually slept at night. I took the horses to graze in a meadow of lucerne and hobbled them. The chairman of the

collective farm did not permit us to let our cattle graze in the lucerne, but I violated this rule, because I wanted my horses to be well-fed. I knew of a secluded spot in the dell and, besides, no one would notice anything at night. This time, when I unhitched the horses and led them to the meadow, I saw that someone had already put four horses out to pasture there. I was indignant. After all, I was the master of a two-horse trap and this gave me the right to be indignant. Without a moment's hesitation, I decided to chase off the strange horses and teach the scoundrel who had infringed upon my territory a lesson. Suddenly, I recognised two of Daniyar's horses. He was the very same fellow whom the team-leader had spoken of that day. Since he and I were to work together beginning next morning, I left his horses alone and returned to the threshing-floor.

I found Daniyar there. He had just finished oiling the wheels of his trap and was now tightening the spokes.

"Daniyar, are those your horses in the dell?" I asked. He turned his head slowly.

"Two are."

"What about the other pair?"

"That's what's-her-name's, Jamila's horses. Who is she, your *djene?"*

"Yes."

"The team-leader himself left them here and asked me to keep an eye on them."

What luck that I hadn't chased them away!

Night fell, and the evening breeze from the mountains settled down. Everything was still at the threshing-floor. Daniyar lay down beside me under a stack of straw, but a short while later he rose and walked over to the river. He stopped at the edge of the high bank and remained standing there with his back to me, his hands behind him and his head tilted to one side. His long, angular body .jutted out sharply in the soft moonlight, as if roughly-hewn. It was as though he was listening intently to the sounds of the water on the rapids, so clear and distinct in the night. Perhaps he was listening to sounds and whisperings I could not hear. "I bet he's decided to spend the night on the bank again!" I thought and smirked.

Daniyar was a newcomer to our village. One day a boy had come running to the field, shouting that a wounded soldier was in the village but that he did not know who he was or where he was from. The excitement that followed! When someone returned from the front every

last person would run to have a look at the new arrival, to shake his hand and ask him if he had seen any relatives, to hear the latest news. This time the shouting was indescribable. Each one wondered: "Perhaps our brother's returned, or maybe an in-law?" The mowers all raced back to the village to see who the man was.

Daniyar, we were to learn, really belonged to our village. They said he had been left an orphan while still a child and had been passed from house to house for about three years until he had finally gone to live with the Kazakhs in the Chakmak Steppe, since his relatives on his mother's side were Kazakhs. The boy had no close relations in our village to claim him, and soon he was forgotten. When they asked him how he had lived after he had left his native village, Daniyar answered evasively, but it was clear he had had his share of sorrow and had drunk full the orphan's bitter cup. Life had chased him like a rolling stone. For a long time he had herded sheep in the Chakmak salt marshes; when he was older he had dug canals in the desert, worked on the new state cotton farms and in the Angren mines near Tashkent, from where he had finally been called up.

The people approved of Daniyar coming back to his native village. They said: "No matter how much he's wandered in strange places, he's finally returned, and that means it's his fate to drink water from his native spring. He hasn't forgotten his language and speaks well, though he uses Kazakh words at times."

"Tulpar will find his own herd even if it's at the other end of the world. A person's native land and people are always closest to his heart. Good for you to have come back. We're pleased, and so are the spirits of your ancestors. With Allah's help, we'll finish off the Germans and live in peace again, and you'll have a family like everyone else, and the smoke will rise from your own hearth, too!" the old *aksakals* said.

In tracing back Daniyar's ancestry, they determined his kin. Thus, a new "relative"--Daniyar--appeared in our village.

Then Orozmat brought this tall, stoop-shouldered, limping soldier to the field. With his greatcoat thrown over his shoulder he walked quickly, trying not to fall behind Orozmat's small paces. Next to tall Daniyar, our short and bouncing team-leader reminded us of a restless river snipe. The boys laughed to see them side by side.

Daniyar's wound had not yet healed and his leg was still stiff; that meant he couldn't be a mower. He was appointed to tend the mowing machines with us boys. To tell the truth, we didn't like him. First of all,

we didn't like his reserve. Daniyar said very little, and if he did, one had the feeling that he was thinking of something else that had nothing to do with what he was saying, that he was taken up with his own thoughts. You never knew whether he saw you or not, though he was looking straight at you with his thoughtful, dreamy eyes.

"Poor fellow, he can't come to himself after being at the front!" they said.

Strangest of all, considering this constant state of reverie, Daniyar worked quickly and skilfully, and at first glance one would take him for a genial and frank sort of person. Perhaps his unhappy childhood had taught him to conceal his thoughts and emotions and had made him so reserved. Quite possibly.

Daniyar's thin lips with the hard lines at the corners of his mouth were always pressed tightly together, his eyes were sad and grave, and only his quick eyebrows gave life to his drawn, tired face. At times he would suddenly grow alert, as though hearing something inaudible to us, and then his eyebrows would shoot up and his eyes would burn with a strange fire. A smile of joy would linger on his face for a long while after. We all thought this very strange; he had other peculiarities as well. In the evenings we would unhitch our horses and gather by the tent, waiting for the cook to prepare our supper, but Daniyar would climb the look-out hill and stay there till dark.

"What's he doing there, standing guard or something?" we'd laugh.

Once, to satisfy my curiosity, I followed him up the hill. There was nothing extraordinary there. The steppe, lilac in the twilight, stretched to the mountain range on the far horizon. The dark, dim fields seemed to be dissolving slowly in the stillness.

Daniyar paid no attention to me. He sat hugging his knees, gazing thoughtfully into the distance. Once again I felt he was listening intently to sounds I could not hear. Now and again he would start and become rigid, his eyes would open wide. Something was bothering him, and I thought that he was about to rise and throw open his soul, but not to me--he didn't even notice me--to something great, vast and unknown to me. But when I looked at him a moment later I did not recognise him: Daniyar sat limply and glumly, as if he were merely resting after the long day's work.

The hayfields of our collective farm lie in the floodlands of the Kurkureu River. Near our village the river escapes from a canyon, rushing down the valley in an unleashed, raging torrent. The time of haying is the flood-time of the mountain rivers. The muddy, foaming

water would begin to rise towards evening. At midnight I would awaken in the tent from the river's terrible heaving and see the stars of the blue, calm night peeping in; the wind came in cold, sudden blasts; the earth slept, and the raging river seemed to be advancing on us menacingly. Though we were not too near the bank, I could sense the water's closeness and was gripped by an involuntary fear of suddenly seeing the tent torn down and washed away. My comrades slept the dead sleep of mowers, but I was restless and would go outside.

Night in the Woodlands of the Kurkureu is both beautiful and frightening. The dark shapes of hobbled horses can be seen here and there in the meadows. They have had their fill of the dewy grass and now doze warily, snorting softly. Past them, bending the whipped, wet rose-willows, the Kurkureu rolls its stones along with a hollow sound. The restless river fills the night with weird, fierce sounds.

On nights such as those I always thought of Daniyar. He usually slept in a haystack at the water's edge. Wasn't he afraid? Didn't the noise of the river deafen him? Could he actually sleep there? Why did he spend his nights alone on the river bank? What force drew him there? He was a strange man, a man from another world. Where was he now? I looked around, but could see no one. The banks receded into the distance as sloping hills, and the mountain range loomed in the darkness. There, on the peaks, all was silence and stars.

One would think Daniyar should have made friends in the village by then. But he was alone as before, as if he knew not the meaning of such words as friendship or enmity, sympathy or envy. In the villages to be recognised as a *djigit* one must be able to stand up for himself and his friends, to do good and at times even evil, to take things in hand at a feast or a wake on an equal footing with *aksakals* and then he will be noticed by the women.

But if a person is like Daniyar and keeps to himself, taking no part in the everyday affairs of the village, then people will either ignore him or say condescendingly:

"He does neither good nor evil. The poor fellow just stumbles along, so let him be."

As a rule, such a person is the butt of all jokes or an object of pity. We youths striving to appear older than we were, to be treated as equals by the true *djigits*, always laughed at Daniyar behind his back, not daring to do so to his face. We even laughed at the fact that he himself washed his army shirt in the river. He would wash it and then put it on while it was still damp, for he had no other.

Strangely, though Daniyar appeared mild and reserved, we never dared to treat him with undue familiarity, and not because he was older than we were--what were three or four years' difference?--and not because he was harsh or conceited, which at times evokes something akin to respect. No, there was something unapproachable in his silent, gloomy thoughtfulness; this held us back, though we were always glad of an opportunity to make fun of someone.

I believe a certain incident was responsible for our restrained attitude towards him. I was a very curious lad and often annoyed people with my endless questions. My great passion was to ask the demobilised soldiers all about the war. When Daniyar came to work with us I kept looking for a chance to find something out from the former soldier.

One evening after work we were sitting around the camp-fire, resting after supper.

"Daniyar, tell us about the war before we go to sleep," I asked.

At first, he said nothing and even seemed to be offended. He gazed long into the fire and finally raised his head to look at us.

"About the war?" he asked. Then, as if answering his own thoughts, he added gruffly: "No, it's best you know nothing of war!"

He turned away, scooped up an armful of dry leaves, threw them on the fire and began blowing on them without looking at us.

Daniyar said no more, but even the few words he did say made us realise that war was not a subject one could talk about so lightly, that it was not a bed-time story. The war had dried in a bloody clot deep in the man's heart and it was not easy for him to speak of it. I was ashamed of myself, and never again did I question him about the war.

However, we quickly forgot that evening, just as quickly as the village lost interest in Daniyar himself.

Early next morning Daniyar and I brought the horses to the threshing-floor. Jamila was soon in coming. Spying us from afar, she shouted:

"Hey, kichine bala, bring my horses over here! Where's the harness?" And she began to inspect the traps closely, as if she had been a driver all her life, kicking the wheels to see if the bushing was in order.

As we drove up she found our appearance to be quite amusing. Daniyar's long, lanky legs dangled in a pair of enormously wide tarpaulin boots that seemed ready to slip off at any moment, while I urged my horse on by kicking my calloused heels into its sides.

"What a fine pair you make!" she said, tossing her head gaily. The next moment she began ordering us about: "Hurry! We've got to cross the steppe before the heat sets in!

She took a firm hold of the bridles, led the horses to the trap and began hitching them up. She did it too, and only once did she ask me to show her how to adjust the reins. She took no notice of Daniyar, as if he were not there at all.

Daniyar appeared stunned by her resolute, defiant air, by her self-confidence. As he stood there pressing his lips together tightly, his look was unfriendly, yet one of concealed admiration. He lifted a sack of grain from the scales and carried it over to the trap in silence. Jamila began to scold him:

"Do you think we'll all work by ourselves? No, my friend, that won't do. Here, give me your hand! What are you gaping at, *kichine bala?* Get on the trap and arrange the sacks!"

Jamila grabbed Daniyar's hand. When they hoisted a sack on bended arms the poor fellow blushed from embarrassment. And then, each time they carried up a sack, grasping each other's wrists tightly, their heads nearly touching, I saw how terribly ill-at-ease he was, how nervously he bit his lips, how he tried not to look into Jamila's face. But it didn't bother her a bit. She seemed not to notice her helper and joked with the woman at the scales. Then, when the traps were loaded and we picked up the reins, she winked slyly and said with a laugh.

"Hey, you, what's-your-name! Daniyar? Since you look like a man, you might as well lead the way!"

Daniyar jerked the reins and was off. "You poor soul," I thought. "Why, to top everything--you're bashful!"

The journey ahead was a long one: fifteen miles over the steppe, then through the canyon to the station. The only good thing about it was that the road was a continual downward slope and it was easy on the horses.

Our village was situated along the bank of the Kurkureu, on a slope of the Great Mountains. The village with its dark tree-tops remains in sight all the way to the canyon.

We only made one trip a day. We'd leave early in the morning and reach the station after noon.

The sun beat down mercilessly, and there was such a crush at the station that it was difficult to make your way through: there were traps and wagons piled high with sacks that had come from all over the valley, there were mules and oxen bringing their loads from the far-off

mountain collective farms. They were driven in by boys and soldiers' wives, black with sunburn, wearing faded clothes, their, bare feet calloused from the stony roads, their lips cracked till they bled from the heat and the dust.

At the grain elevator was a large slogan: "Every ear of corn to the front!" The commotion, jostling and shouting of the drivers in the yard was indescribable. Close by, behind a low wall, a locomotive was manoeuvring into position, throwing out tight knots of hot steam and giving off a smell of burnt slag. Trains thundered by. Camels reluctant to get up from the ground bellowed desperately, angrily opening wide their saliva-filled months.

The mountains of grain at the receiving station were piled high beneath a red-hot iron roof. The sacks had to be carried along sloping wooden planks right under the roof. The air was heavy with the smell of grain, and the dust was choking.

"Hey, you! Watch your step!" the receiving agent with red-rimmed eyes from lack of sleep shouted from below. "Take them up, way up to the top!" He shook his fist and cursed.

Why was he cursing? We knew where to take them and we'd get them there. After all, we had carried the sacks from the very fields where women, old men and children had planted the wheat and reaped it, and now, at the height of the harvesting season, the combine operator was struggling with the old machine that had long since outlived its usefulness, where the women's backs were always bent over their scorching sickles, where children's hands carefully collected each dropped ear of corn.

I still remember how heavy those sacks were. It was a job for a powerful man. I trudged onwards, balancing on the squeaking, sagging boards, a corner of the sack clamped tightly between my teeth to help me carry it, to keep from dropping it. My throat itched from the dust, my ribs ached from the weight, and fiery circles danced before my eyes. Many were the times when I'd begin to feel dizzy, knowing there was no stopping the sack from slipping; my one thought would be to let go of it and go tumbling down after it. But there were others behind me. They were also carrying sacks, they were young boys my age or soldiers' wives who had boys like me. If not for the war, who would ever have permitted them to carry such loads? No, I had no right to retreat when women were doing the same work as 1.

There was Jamila ahead of me; her skirt was tucked up above her knees and I could see the muscles strain on her beautiful tan legs, I

could see what a great effort it was for her to keep her lithe body steady as she bent under the weight of the sack. She would sometimes halt for a second, as if sensing that I was becoming weaker with each successive step.

"Chin up, *kichine bala*, we're nearly there!"

But her own voice sounded hollow and lifeless.

When we had emptied our sacks and turned back, we would see Daniyar coming up. He limped slightly as he walked along the planks in a strong, measured step. As we'd come abreast of him, Daniyar would cast a dark and burning look at Jamila. She would straighten her tired back and pull down her wrinkled dress. Each time he looked at her as if he were seeing her for the first time, Jamila continued to ignore him.

It had become a pattern: depending on her mood, Jamila either laughed at him or ignored him completely. We could be riding along, when she'd suddenly shout to me: "Come on, let's go!" With a whoop and swinging the whip over her head, she'd start the horses at a gallop. I would follow. We would overtake Daniyar, smothering him in a heavy cloud of dust which took long to settle on the road again. Though this was done in jest, few men would have tolerated it. But Daniyar seemed not to mind. We'd thunder by while he looked with unsmiling admiration at the laughing Jamila, standing erect in the trap. As I turned back, I would see him gazing at her through the dust. There was something kind and all-forgiving in his look, yet I sensed a stubborn, hidden sadness.

Neither by poking fun at him, nor by ignoring him did she ever make him lose his temper. It was as if he had vowed to bear it all. At first I felt sorry for him and often reproached Jamila: "Why do you make fun of him, *djene?* He's so quiet and meek!"

"Oh!" she would laugh and shrug. "It's all in fun, and nothing will ever happen to such a crab!"

Soon I, too, began to make jokes at his expense. His strange, insistent looks worried me. How he stared as she hoisted a sack on her back! True enough, amidst the noise, the jostling and the market-place commotion of the receiving station, with people hoarse from shouting, dashing back and forth, Jamila's confident, calculated movements and light step, attracted attention, making it seem as if she were somewhere beyond the confines of the yard.

It was difficult not to stop and look at her. In order to take a sack from the edge of the trap, Jamila would stretch up and turn, thrusting

her shoulders forward and throwing her head back in a way that bared her beautiful neck and made her sun-reddened braids nearly touch the ground. Daniyar would stop, as if to rest, but his eyes followed her to the very door. He surely thought that no one noticed him, but I saw everything and disliked what I saw; I even felt insulted, for I could never consider Daniyar worthy of Jamila.

"Just think of it, even he stares at her--then what can you expect from the others!" I fumed. The childish egoism I had not yet outgrown flared up in terrible jealousy. Children always resent their loved ones paying attention to outsiders. Now, instead of feeling sorry for Daniyar, I disliked him so intensely, I was happy when anyone made fun of him.

However, our jokes once ended quite unfortunately. Among the grain sacks there was a huge 280-pound one, made of coarse, raw wool. We usually carried it together, as it was far too heavy to carry alone. One day at the threshing-floor we decided to play a trick on Daniyar. We dumped this huge sack into his trap and piled other sacks on top of it. On the way, Jamila and I stopped off in a Russian village and picked some apples in someone's orchard. We laughed all the way and she threw apples at him. Then, as usual, we overtook him, raising a cloud of dust. He caught up with us beyond the canyon at the railroad crossing, for the barrier was down. From there we drove to the station together. We had completely forgotten about the huge sack and did not think about it until we were through unloading. Jamila nudged me mischievously and nodded towards Daniyar. He was standing in the trap, looking at the sack with some concern, apparently trying to decide what to do with it. Then he looked round, and when he noticed Jamila hiding a smile, he blushed, realising what was up.

"Pull your pants up, or you'll lose them on the way!" Jamila shouted.

Daniyar looked at us angrily; then, before we had time to realise what he was doing, he pulled the sack along the bottom of the trap, set it on the edge, jumped down and, steadying it with one hand, lowered it onto his back. He started walking. At first we made believe there was nothing so special about what he was doing. The others certainly noticed nothing: there was a man carrying a sack--but so was everyone else. When Daniyar approached the gangway, Jamila caught up with him.

"Let go of the sack, I was just fooling!"

"Go away!" he muttered and stepped onto the planks.

"Look, he's carrying it!" Jamila cried, as if trying to .justify herself. She was still laughing softly, but her laughter. was strained, it was as if she were forcing herself to laugh.

We noticed that Daniyar was beginning to limp more markedly. Why hadn't we thought of that before? To this day I cannot forgive myself for that foolish prank. It was I, idiot that I was, who had thought of it!

"Come back!" Jamila shouted, her strange laughter a hollow sound. But Daniyar could not turn back: there were others close behind him.

I can't seem to recall clearly what happened after, that. I saw Daniyar, bent double under the tremendous weight, his head low, his teeth sunk into his lip. He trudged on slowly, moving his wounded leg with care. Each new step apparently caused him such pain that his head jerked back and he would stop for a second. The higher he climbed, the more he swayed. The sack made him stagger. My mouth went dry from fright and shame. Frozen with fear, every fibre of my body felt the weight of his burden and the unbearable pain in his wounded leg. He lurched again, jerked his head back and everything swain before my eyes; everything went black, the earth moved from under my feet.

I came to my senses with a start from a steel-like grip on my hand. I did not immediately recognise Jamila. She was as white as a sheet, her pupils were dilated, her lips still twitched from her recent laughter. By then everyone else, including the receiving agent, had rushed to the foot of the gangway. Daniyar took two more steps. He tried to adjust the sack, and then suddenly began to sink to one knee. Jamila covered her face.

"Let go! Let go of the sack!" she screamed.

But Daniyar would not let go of it, though he could have certainly let it slip over the side, in order not to fell those behind him. At the sound of Jamila's voice, he lurched forward, straightened his leg, took another step, and began to sway again.

"Let go of it, you son-of-a-bitch!" the receiving agent bellowed.

"Let go!" everyone shouted.

Once again Daniyar stood his ground.

"No, he won't let go!" someone whispered with conviction.

Everyone there, both those behind him and those below, realised that he would not let go unless he himself toppled over together with it. There was a dead silence. The locomotive beyond the wall whistled shrilly.

Daniyar trudged onwards, swaying like one in a trance, onwards,

towards the red-hot iron roof, up the sagging boards of the gangway. He stopped every two steps to regain his balance; gathering his strength, he continued on up. Those behind fell in step and stopped when he did. This exhausted them, it drained their last ounce of strength, but no one was angry, no one cursed. They trudged onwards with their burdens, as if tied together by an invisible rope, as if they were treading a dangerous, slippery path, where the life of one depended upon the life of another. There was a single heavy rhythm in their silence and monotonous swaying. One step, another step behind Daniyar, and yet another.

There was just a little left to go, but Daniyar swayed again, his wounded leg would no longer obey him. He would certainly fall if he didn't let go of the sack.

"Run! Support it from behind!" Jamila cried to me, stretching forth her arms helplessly, as if this could somehow help him.

I dashed up the gangway. Elbowing my way through people and sacks, I finally reached him. He looked at me from under his arm. The veins throbbed on his dark, wet forehead, his bloodshot eyes burned through me with hate. I wanted to support the sack from behind.

"Go 'way!" he snapped and moved on.

When he finally came panting and limping down, his arms hung loosely by his sides. The people parted to let him pass, but the receiving agent could not control himself and shouted:

"Are you mad? Don't you think I'm human? Don't you think I'd have let you empty the sack down below? Why do you carry such sacks?"

"That's my business," Daniyar answered quietly.

He spat to a side and walked towards the trap. We did not dare raise our eyes and were ashamed and angry at Daniyar for having taken our foolish prank so seriously.

We rode in silence all night long. Since this was Daniyar's natural state, we couldn't tell whether he was still angry at us or whether he had forgotten the entire incident. But we were conscience-stricken and wretched.

Next morning, as we were loading grain at the threshing-floor, Jamila grabbed the ill-fated sack, stepped firmly on one edge, and ripped it apart.

"Here, take your old rag!" she said, tossing it at the surprised

weigher's feet. "And tell the team-leader not to slip us any more like it!"

"What's the matter with you? What happened?"

"Nothing!"

All the next day Daniyar behaved as quietly and calmly as ever, in no way expressing his feelings, though his limp was more marked, and especially so when he carried a sack. His old wound had apparently re-opened; it was a constant reminder of our guilt. Nevertheless, if he had laughed or joked, it would have put an end to the strain. Jamila, too, pretended that nothing unusual had happened. A proud girl, she laughed as always, but I saw how ill-at-ease she was.

It was late as we journeyed home from the station. Daniyar rode on ahead. The night was magnificent. Who does not know these August nights with their far-off, yet so close, gleaming stars! There was one star: it seemed frozen round the edges, its icy rays sparkled as it looked down from the dark sky in surprise at the earth below. I gazed at it as we rode through the canyon. The horses, eager to be home, trotted briskly and gravel crunched under the wheels. The wind from the steppe brought the bitter smell of flowering wormwood, the faint aroma of cooling ripe wheat, and all this, mingling with the smell of tar and horses' sweat, made our heads light.

To one side dark briar-covered cliffs hung over the road; to the other, from far below, from the thicket of rose-willow and young poplars, the restless Kurkureu rushed on. Now and then a train would thunder over the far bridge; the clatter of its wheels would trail it long after it had vanished in the distance.

It was good to ride in the coolness, to watch the moving backs of the horses, to listen to the sound of the August night and breathe in its smells. Jamila rode ahead of me. She had let go of the reins and was looking about as she sang softly. I knew our silence hung heavily on her. It was impossible to be silent on such a night--it was a night made for singing.

And she began to sing. Perhaps she sang because she was seeking a way to return the former easy spirit of our relationship and because she wanted to dispel her feeling of guilt. She had a ringing, mischievous voice, and she sang the usual village songs: "I'll wave my kerchief as you pass", and "My beloved has gone far away". She knew many songs and sang them simply and with feeling, making it pleasant to listen to her. Suddenly, she stopped and hailed Daniyar:

"Hey, Daniyar, why don't you sing something? Aren't you a

djigit?"

"You sing, Jamila," he answered in some confusion, holding back his horses. "I'm listening, I'm all ears."

"Don't you think we have ears, too? Nobody's forcing you, you don't have to if you don't want to!" And Jamila began to sing again.

Who knows why she had asked him to sing! Perhaps it was just a whim, or perhaps she wanted to draw him into a conversation? It was probably the latter, for soon she shouted again:

"Tell me, Daniyar, were you ever in love?" And she laughed.

He said nothing. Jamila also fell silent.

"She certainly found the right person to ask for a song!" I thought.

The horses slowed down at the little river that crossed the road. Their hooves clattered over the wet, silvery stones. When we had passed the ford, Daniyar whipped his horses and suddenly began to sing in a strained voice that broke at every bump in the road:

My mountains, my blue-white mountains,
The land of my fathers and grandfathers.

Then he faltered, coughed and sang the next two lines in a deep, slightly hoarse baritone:

My mountains, my blue-white mountains,
My cradle of life. . .

Here he stopped again, as if frightened by something, and fell silent.

I imagined his embarrassment quite vividly. However, there was something deeply moving in this halting, timid singing, and he probably had a very good voice: it was difficult to believe that it was Daniyar.

"Well, well!" I exclaimed.

"Why didn't you ever sing before? Sing! Sing as you *really* can!" Jamila cried.

It was light ahead, there the canyon ended. A breeze was blowing from the valley. Daniyar began to sing again. He began as timidly and uncertainly as before, but gradually his voice gained volume, it filled the canyon, resounding and echoing from the far-off cliffs.

I was most amazed by the passion and fire of the song. I did not know what to call it and do not know now; rather, I cannot determine whether it was the voice alone or something bigger, something that came from the soul, something capable of arousing the same emotion

in another, capable of bringing to life one's innermost thoughts.

If I were only able to re-create in some way Daniyar's song! There were hardly any words to it, but without words it revealed a big human heart. Neither before nor after did I ever hear such a song: it was neither Kirghiz nor Kazakh, but there was something of both in it. Daniyar had combined the best melodies of the two related peoples and had curiously woven them into a never-to-be-repeated pattern. This was a song of the mountains and steppes, now soaring like the Kirghiz mountains, now vast and rolling like the Kazakh steppes.

As I listened I became more and more amazed:

"So that's what Daniyar is really like! Who would have ever believed it?"

We were crossing the steppe along the soft, beaten road. Daniyar's voice soared, ever new melodies followed one another with astounding grace. Was he so gifted? What had happened to him? It was as if he had been waiting for this day, for this hour to come!

And suddenly I understood his strangeness which made people shrug and smile--his dreaminess, his love of solitude, his silences. I understood why he spent his evenings on the look-out hill and his nights alone on the river bank, why he was constantly listening to sounds inaudible to others, and why his eyes would suddenly sparkle and his usually drawn eyebrows twitch. This was a person who was deeply in love. And I felt that this was not merely love for another person; this was different, it was a tremendous love--of life, of the earth. Yes, he kept this love within himself, in his music--it was his guiding light. An indifferent person could never have sung as he did, no matter how great his voice.

When it seemed that the last note had died away, a new, haunting wave seemed to waken the dozing steppe, and it listened gratefully to the singer whose dear, native melody was like a caress. The ripe, yellow ash-wheat awaiting harvesting rippled like the surface of a lake, and the first shadows of dawn darted over the field. A mighty regiment of old willows at the mill rustled their leaves, beyond tile river tile camp-fires of the field workers were dying down, and a shadowy rider was galloping silently along the river bank towards the village, now disappearing among the orchards, now reappearing again. The wind was heavy with the smell of apples, the warm, milk-like scent of flowering maize and the smell of drying dung bricks.

Daniyar sang on and on, oblivious to everything, while the enchanted August night listened to him in silence. Even the horses had

long since changed to a walk, as if afraid to break the spell.

Abruptly, on the highest ringing note, Daniyar broke off his song, whooped, and whipped his horses. I thought Jamila would gallop after him and was ready to follow her, but she did not move. She remained sitting with her head inclined, as if listening to the last tremulous notes drifting in the air. Daniyar rode off. Neither of us said a word until we reached the village. There was no need to talk, for words cannot always express all one feels.

It seemed that from that day on a change came over our lives. It was as if I was forever waiting for something wonderful and much desired to happen. In the mornings we would load our traps at the threshing-floor, ride to the station, and hurry to be off again, in order to listen to Daniyar's singing on the way home. His voice had become a part of me, it followed me everywhere, it was with me in the morning as I ran across the wet dewy lucerne to the hobbled horses, the laughing sun rolling out from behind the mountains to greet me. I heard his voice in the soft rustling of the golden rain of wheat, thrown up to the wind by the old winnowers, and in the graceful circling flight of the lonely hawk high above the steppe--in everything that I saw and heard I imagined Daniyar's singing.

As we rode along the canyon in the evenings I felt I was being transported to another world. I would listen to him with my eyes half-closed, and there would arise before me the strangely familiar scenes I had known from childhood: now the soft, smoky-blue clouds of spring would float high above the tents; now herds of horses would gallop across the ringing earth to their summer pastures and the young stallions with long forelocks and wild black fire in their eyes would proudly overtake the mares; now flocks of sheep would slowly spread like lava over the hills; now a water-fall would dash down from a cliff, its white foaming water blinding; now the sun would set softly in the thicket of needle grass beyond the river and the lonely rider on the fiery edge of the horizon seemed in pursuit of it--he need only stretch his hand to touch the sun--and then he, too, would vanish in the thicket and the twilight.

Wide is the Kazakh steppe beyond the river. It had spread the mountains apart to make room for itself and lay stark and desolate between them.

That first memorable summer of war, fires had burned across the steppe, herds of army horses obscured it in clouds of hot dust and riders galloped off in all directions. I remember a Kazakh racing by

along the opposite bank, shouting in a shepherd's guttural voice:

"Kirghizes! Saddle your horses--the enemy has come!" then he disappeared in a cloud of dust and a wave of hot air.

Everyone rose to meet the challenge: a solemn and thundering rumble accompanied our first cavalry divisions as they came down from the mountains and moved across the valleys. Thousands of stirrups jangled, thousands of *djigits* took to the saddle; ahead of them red banners waved on the colour staffs, behind, beyond the dust raised by the horses' hooves, the sorrowful and majestic wail of their mothers and wives throbbed and beat against the ground: "May the steppe protect you! May the spirit of our great warrior Manas protect you!"

Bitter paths remained where the men had gone off to war.

Daniyar's song had opened my eyes to this great world of earthly beauty and suffering. Where had he learned all this? Who had he heard it from? I felt that only a person who had longed for his native land for many years and who had suffered for this love could love it so. As he sang, I visualised him as a small boy, wandering along the roads of the steppe. Perhaps it was then that these songs of his native land had first awakened in his soul? Or was it when he had followed the fiery paths of war?

His song made me want to lie down and embrace the earth, as a son, in gratitude that it was there, that one could love it so. It was then that I felt something new awakening inside of me, something I had no words for, something irresistible, a compulsion to express myself--yes, to express myself, not only to see and sense the world myself, but to make others see my vision, my thoughts and emotions, to tell people of the beauties of our earth as exaltedly as Daniyar could do. I would catch my breath at the fear and joy of something quite unknown, for I did not yet realise my calling in life was painting.

I had always liked to draw. I would copy the illustrations in my textbooks, and the boys all said they were "perfect copies". The teachers praised my drawings for our wall newspaper. But when war broke out, my brothers were called up, I quit school and went to work on the collective farm, as did every other boy my age. I forgot all about paints and brushes and never thought I would think of them again. But Daniyar's songs had stirred my soul. I was in a daze, I looked at the world in bewilderment, as if I were seeing everything for the first time.

As for Jamila, a great change had suddenly come over her. It was as if the lively, sharp-tongued laughing girl had never existed. A shimmering spring sadness clouded her misty eyes. She was constantly

lost in thought on our long rides to the station. A vague, dreamy smile would touch her lips, and she would softly rejoice at something she alone was aware of. Many were the times when she'd stand with a heavy sack on her shoulders, suddenly gripped by a strange timidity, as if she were standing on the bank of a rushing current and did not know whether to cross it or not. She avoided Daniyar and would not look him straight in the face.

Once, at the threshing-floor, Jamila said with a helpless annoyance:

"Take off your shirt--I'll wash it for you."

Then, after she had washed it in the river, she spread it out to dry and sat down beside it, smoothing out the wrinkles carefully, holding it up to the sun to see the worn shoulders, shaking her head and then smoothing it again softly and sadly.

Only once did Jamila laugh loudly and infectiously as before, her eyes shining brightly as they used to. One day a noisy crowd of young women, girls and demobilised *djigits* turned in at the threshing-floor on their way home from stacking lucerne.

"Hey, you *bais,* you're not the only ones who want to eat white bread! Give us some, or we'll throw you into the river!" the *djigits* shouted and thrust out their pitchforks jokingly.

"You can't scare us! I'll find something for the girls, but you can fend for yourselves!" Jamila answered merrily.

"If that's the case, we'll toss you all in!"

The youths and girls began to wrestle. Shouting, screaming and laughing, they tried to push each other into the water.

"Catch them! Pull them in!" Jamila laughed, shouting louder than the rest, skilfully evading her opponents.

Strangely, the *djigits* had eyes only for Jamila. Each tried to catch her, to press her close. Suddenly, three youths grabbed her and carried her to the bank.

"Kiss us, or we'll throw you in!"

"Come on, let's swing her!"

Jamila writhed and wriggled, she laughed and called to her girl-friends for help, but they were running wildly up and down the bank, fishing their kerchiefs out of the water. Jamila flew into the river to the merry laughter of the *djigits.* She emerged with streaming hair, more beautiful than ever. Her wet cotton dress hugged her body, accentuating her lovely round hips and young breasts, but she noticed nothing and laughed, swaying back and forth while streams of water

trickled down her flushed face.

"Kiss us!" the *djigits* persisted.

Jamila kissed them, but again she flew into the water, and again she laughed, throwing back the heavy wet strands of hair from her face.

Everyone at the threshing-floor roared with laughter at the young people's pranks. The old winnowers threw down their spades and wiped the tears from their eyes. The wrinkles on their dark faces shone with joy and with tile spirit of youth revived fleetingly. I, too, laughed heartily, forgetting for once my sacred duty to protect Jamila from the *djigits.*

Daniyar alone was silent. I suddenly noticed him and also stopped laughing. He was a solitary figure at the edge of the threshing-floor, standing there with his feet planted far apart. I had a feeling that he wanted to rush forward and snatch Jamila away from the *djigits.* He stared at her, and his look was one of sadness and admiration in which there was both happiness and pain. Yes, Jamila's beauty was a source of happiness and grief to him. When the *djigits* pressed her close and forced her to kiss each in turn, he would lower his head and make as if to leave, but he would not.

Meanwhile, Jamila had also noticed him. She immediately stopped laughing and hung her head.

"That's enough fooling around!" she suddenly checked the boisterous djigits.

One of them tried to embrace her.

"Go away!" she said, shoving him back. She stole a guilty glance at Daniyar, then ran into the bushes to wring out her dress.

There was much I could not understand in their relationship and, to tell the truth, I was afraid to think about it. Yet, I felt uneasy when I noticed Jamila was sad because she herself was avoiding Daniyar. It would have been better if she had laughed and made fun of him as before. At the same time, however, our trips back to the village at night to the sound of Daniyar's singing inspired me with a strange feeling of happiness for them both.

Jamila rode in the trap when we drove through the canyon, but she would walk alongside it in the steppe. I would, too, for it was nicer to walk along and listen. At first we would each follow our own trap, but soon, without noticing it, a strange force would draw us closer to Daniyar. We wanted to see the expression of his face and eyes--could the singer really be the glum, unsociable Daniyar!

Each time I noticed that Jamila would be both stunned and touched,

that she would slowly stretch her hand towards him, yet he would not see it, for he would be looking far off into the distance, his hands behind his head, swaying from side to side; then Jamila's hand would drop helplessly on the edge of the trap. She would start, jerk it back and stop walking. Standing there in the middle of the road, downcast and stunned, she would follow him with her eyes and then begin walking again.

At times I would think that Jamila and I were both troubled by the same and equally unfathomable feeling. Perhaps the hour had struck, bringing to life a feeling that had long been lying latent in our souls?

Jamila was still able to lose herself in her work, but during those rare moments of rest when we waited around at the threshing-floor, she was terribly restless. She would stand about near the winnowers; sometimes, after tossing several shovels full of wheat high up into the wind with an easy, graceful movement, she would suddenly throw down her spade and walk over to the stacks of straw. Here she would sit down in the shade and, as if afraid to be alone with herself, she would call me:

"Come here, *kichine bala!* Let's sit here together for a while."

I always expected her to tell me something important and explain what it was that was worrying her. But she said nothing. Putting my head in her lap silently and looking off into the distance, she would run her fingers through my bristly hair and gently stroke my face with hot, trembling hands. I looked up at her, at her face, so full of vague anxiety and yearning, and seemed to recognise myself in it. Something was tormenting her, something was gathering and ripening in her soul, demanding an outlet, and she was afraid of it. She painfully desired and, just as painfully, did not wish to admit to herself that she was in love, just as I did and did not want her to love Daniyar. After all, she was my parents' daughter-in-law, my brother's wife.

But such thoughts were fleeting, I drove them from my mind. My greatest joy was to see her tender lips, half-parted as a child's, to see her tear-dimmed eyes. How lovely, how beautiful she was, how inspired and passionate was her face! I sensed this, but could not understand it at the time. Even now I often ask myself: perhaps love produces a feeling of inspiration similar to that experienced by an artist or a poet? Gazing at Jamila, I wanted to run into the. steppe and shout to the heavens and earth, asking them what to do to overcome the strange anxiety and joy that was in me. And once, I think, I found the answer.

As usual, we were returning from the station. Night had fallen, the stars were like swarms of bees in the sky, the steppe was dropping off to sleep, and only Daniyar's song, breaking the stillness, rang out and faded in the soft, distant darkness. Jamila and I followed him.

I don't know what came over Daniyar that night--there was such a deep, tender sadness, such loneliness in his voice that it brought tears of sympathy and compassion to our eyes.

Jamila walked beside his trap, holding on to the side tightly, her head inclined. When Daniyar's voice soared again, she tossed her head, jumped into the trap and sat down beside him. She sat there as if made of stone, her hands folded across her chest. I walked alongside, hurrying forward a bit to have a better look at them. Daniyar continued to sing, talking no notice of Jamila. I saw her arms drop, she leaned towards him and laid her head lightly on his shoulder. For a moment, as a pacer feeling the whip changes his step, his voice wavered, only to resound with greater power than before. He was singing a song of love!

I was astounded. The steppe seemed to blossom, it heaved, drawing apart the darkness, and I saw two lovers in its vast expanse. They did not see me, I did not exist. I walked beside them, watching them sway in rhythm to the song, oblivious to everything in the world. I did not recognise them. It was the same old Daniyar in his shabby soldier's shirt open at the throat, but his eyes seemed to burn in the darkness. It was my own Jamila pressing close to him, so subdued and timid, with teardrops shimmering on her lashes. These were two newly-born people, their happiness was unprecedented. And was this not happiness? Was not Daniyar imparting to her his great love for his native land, one which had created this inspired music? Yes, he was singing for her, he was singing of her.

Once again I was overcome by the strange excitement which Daniyar's singing always aroused in me. Suddenly, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to paint them.

I became frightened at my own thought, but my desire was greater than my fear. I would paint them exactly as they were--lost in happiness! Yes, exactly as they were right then! But would I be able to do it? Fear and joy caught my breath. I walked as one in a trance. I, too, was happy, for I did not yet know how much trouble this rash desire would cause me in the future. I told myself that one should see the earth as Daniyar saw it, that I would use colours to portray his song. I would also have mountains and steppe, people, grasses, clouds and rivers. Then the thought flashed through my mind: but where will I

get the paints? They won't give me any in school, because they need them themselves! As if this were the main problem!

Suddenly Daniyar broke off his song. Jamila had impetuously thrown her arms around him, but had drawn back immediately; she froze for a moment, moved away, and jumped down. Daniyar pulled at the reins hesitantly. The horses stopped. Jamila was standing in the road with her back towards him. Then she tossed her head, looked at him sideways, and said through her tears:

"What are you looking at?" After a moment's pause, she added harshly: "Don't look at me, keep on going!" and went over to her own trap. "What are you gaping at?" she shouted at me. "Get in, and pick up your reins! Oh, you make me sick!"

"What came over her?" I wondered, urging on the horses. It was not difficult to guess though: she was greatly distressed, for she was married and her husband was living, he was in a hospital in Saratov. I refused to puzzle it out. I was angry at her and angry at myself; perhaps, I would have really begun to hate her if I had known that Daniyar would sing no more, that I would never hear his voice again.

My whole body ached, I could not wait to get back and fall into the hay. The trotting horses' backs joggled in the dark, the trap rattled unbearably, the reins kept slipping from my hands.

Back at the threshing-floor I barely managed to pull off the harness and throw it under the trap. I collapsed in a heap as soon as I reached the hay. This time Daniyar led the horses out to pasture.

Next morning I awoke with joy. I would paint Jamila and Daniyar. I closed my eyes tight and imagined exactly how I would portray them. All I needed was paint and brushes and I could begin.

I ran to the river, washed and then ran to the hobbled horses. The cold, wet lucerne slapped loudly against my bare legs, it stung the cracked skin of my soles, but I felt wonderful. As I ran, I took note of everything that was going on around me. The sun was emerging from behind the mountains and a sunflower that had somehow taken root near the irrigation ditch stretched towards it. White-topped knapweed crowded round it greedily, but it stood firm, catching the morning sun, snatching it from them with its yellow tongues and nourishing its tight and heavy cap of seeds. There the water trickled down the wagon tracks where the wheels had churned up the mud at the crossing. There was a lavender island of fragrant, waist-high mint. I was running across my native soil, swallows raced on overhead--ah! If only I had the paints to capture the morning sun, the blue-white mountains, the dew-

drenched lucerne, and the lonely sunflower growing at the edge of the ditch.

When I returned to the threshing-floor, my happy mood was immediately clouded. I saw Jamila. She was depressed, her face was pinched, and there were dark rings under her eyes; she had probably spent a sleepless night. She neither smiled nor spoke to me, but when Orozmat appeared, Jamila went up to him and said:

"Take your old trap back! Send me any place you want, but I won't deliver grain to the station any more!"

"What's the matter, child? Did a horsefly bite you?" he asked in a surprised and kindly voice.

"Horseflies bite calves! And don't ask me why! I said I won't go, and that's all there is to it!"

The smile disappeared from Orozmat's face.

"I don't care what you want! You'll do your job all the same!" He banged his crutch on the ground. "If someone's offended you, tell me and I'll break this crutch over his head! But if not, stop playing the fool: it's soldiers' bread you're delivering, and your own husband is out there!" He turned sharply and hobbled away.

Jamila was embarrassed, she blushed and then sighed softly as she looked at Daniyar. He stood off to a side with his back to her, tightening the hame-strap on the horse's collar with jerky movements. He had heard their conversation. For a while Jamila remained standing where she was, fingering her whip. Then she shrugged recklessly and walked towards her trap.

That day we returned earlier than usual. Daniyar raced his horses all the way. Jamila was silent and gloomy, while I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the scorched and blackened steppe before me. Why, only yesterday it had been so different. It was as if I had heard about it in a fairy-tale, and the picture of happiness that had awakened my consciousness would not leave me for a moment. I had grasped the brightest edge of life, recreating it in my imagination in its every detail until it alone enveloped my every thought. I could not rest until I had stolen a piece of heavy white paper from the weigher. I ran off and hid behind a haystack. There, with my heart thumping in my throat, I laid it on the smooth wooden back of a spade which I had picked up on my way.

"Thc blessings of Allah be upon it!" I whispered, as my father had once done when putting me on a horse for the first time. Then I touched the paper with my pencil. These were my first untutored lines.

But when Daniyar's features appeared on the sheet, I forgot everything else. I imagined the August steppe at night, I imagined that I heard his song and saw him with his head thrown back and his throat bare, I saw Jamila leaning against his shoulder. There was the trap and the two of them, there were the reins thrown over the front of the trap, the horses' backs joggling in the darkness, and beyond that, the steppe and the far-away stars.

I was so engrossed in my work that I did not hear a thing and started when I heard someone's voice over me.

"Are you deaf?"

It was Jamila. I was embarrassed and blushed, but was not quick enough in hiding my drawing.

"The traps are all loaded and we've been shooting for you this past hour! What are you doing here? What's this?" she asked, picking up the drawing. "Hm!" she shrugged angrily.

I wished I were dead. She kept looking at the drawing for a long, long time and finally raised her sad, moist eyes to me.

"Give it to me, *kichine bala.* I'll put it away as a remembrance," she said softly. Folding the sheet, she tucked it inside her blouse.

We were already on the road, yet I could not come back to reality. It all seemed a dream. I could not believe that I had drawn something resembling that which I had seen. Yet, somewhere deep in my heart there grew a naive feeling of triumph, even pride, and dreams one more daring than the next, one more enticing than the next, made my head swim. I now wanted to do many more pictures. These would be paintings, not pencil drawings. I paid no attention to our fast pace. It was Daniyar who was racing his horses. Jamila did not fall behind. She kept looking about, at times she would smile in a touching, self-conscious way. I also smiled, for it meant she was no longer angry at us, and if she would ask him to, Daniyar would sing again that evening.

That day we arrived at the station much earlier than usual, and our horses were in a lather. No sooner had we pulled up the traps than Daniyar began unloading. What had come over him? Why was he in such a rush? From time to time he would stop and follow the trains thundering by with a long, thoughtful gaze. Jamila followed his gaze in an effort to understand what he was thinking about.

"Come here, this horse-shoe's loose. Help me pull it off," she called to him.

When Daniyar had pried it off the hoof he was holding between his

knees and had straightened up, Jamila looked into his eyes and asked softly:

"What's the matter? Don't you understand? Or am I the only girl in the world?"

Daniyar looked away and did not answer.

"Do you think it's easy on me?" she sighed.

Daniyar's eyebrows twitched, he gazed at her with love and sadness and replied so quietly I could not hear his words; then he quickly walked back to his trap, looking rather pleased. He stroked the horse-shoe as he walked.

What consolation could he have found in Jamila's words? And could a person find consolation if one sighed heavily and said: "Do you think it's easy on me?"

We were through with the unloading and were ready to leave, when a gaunt, wounded soldier in a creased greatcoat with a knapsack slung over his shoulder entered the yard of the receiving station. A few minutes before a train had pulled in. The soldier looked round and shouted:

"Is there anyone here from Kurkureu village?"

"I'm from Kurkureu!" I answered, wondering who the man could be.

"Whose boy are you?" the soldier asked, walking towards me. Suddenly he saw Jamila, and a surprised and happy grin spread over his face.

"Kerim? Is it you?" she cried.

"Jamila, my dear!" he shouted and squeezed her hand tightly in his.

He was her fellow-villager.

"What luck! It certainly was lucky that I looked in here!" he said excitedly. "I just left Sadyk, we were in the hospital together, and with Allah to protect him, he'll be out in a month or two. When I was ready to leave I told him to write his wife a letter and promised to deliver it. Here it is, signed and sealed." Kerim handed her a triangular envelope.

Jamila snatched it, blushed, then blanched and looked at Daniyar, cautiously from the corner of her eye. He stood beside the trap. As that day at the threshing-floor, he was a lonely figure standing beside the trap, his eyes full of wild despair as he looked straight at her.

By then people began gathering from all sides; the soldier discovered his friends and relations in the crowd, he was bombarded with questions. Before Jamila had a chance to thank him for the letter, Daniyar's trap clattered by, flew out of the yard and, raising a cloud of

dust, went bumping along the rutted road.

"He must be crazy!" the people shouted.

The soldier had been led away by the crowd, while Jamila and I remained standing in the middle of the yard, looking at the fast-disappearing cloud of dust.

"Come on, *djene," I* said.

"You go on, leave me alone!" she said bitterly.

Thus, for the first time, each of us rode back alone. The stifling heat burned my parched lips. The cracked, scorched earth that had turned white from the heat of the day seemed to be cooling off and was becoming covered with salty grey flakes. The unsteady, formless sun shimmered in the salty white mist. There, above the dim horizon, orange-red storm clouds were gathering. Blasts of dry wind deposited white dust on the horses' muzzles, it waved their manes and passed on, rippling the clumps of wormwood on the hillocks.

"It looks as though it is going to rain," I thought.

I felt so lonely and anxious! I whipped my horses on, for they kept slowing down to a walk. Skinny, long-legged bustards scampered past into the ravine. Withered burdock leaves were swept along the road; no burdocks grow on our lands, they had been blown over from the Kazakh side. The sun went down. There was not a soul in sight, nothing save the heat-exhausted steppe.

It was dark when I reached the threshing-floor. Thc air was still and windless. I called to Daniyar.

"He's gone to the river," the watchman answered. "It's so close, everyone's gone home. There's nothing to do at a threshing-floor if there's no wind!"

I led the horses out to pasture and decided to go down to the river. I knew Daniyar's favourite place near the Cliff.

He was sitting there, hunched over, his head resting on his knees, and listening to the rushing water below. I wanted to walk up to him, put my arm around him and say something comforting. But what could I say? I stood off to a side and finally turned back. After that I lay for a long time on the straw, looking up at the cloud-darkened sky and wondering why life was so complicated and so difficult to understand.

Jamila had not yet returned. What could have happened to her? I could not fall asleep, though I was dead tired. Lightning flashed in the cloud banks high over the mountains.

When Daniyar came back to the threshing-floor I was still awake. He wandered about aimlessly, keeping a watchful eye on the road.

Then he slumped down on the straw near by. I was certain he would leave, that he would never remain in the village! But where could he go? Alone and homeless, he had no one waiting for him. As I was dozing off I heard the slow clatter of an approaching trap. It was probably Jamila returning.

I don't know how long I had been sleeping when I felt the straw rustle at my ear. Someone passed, and it seemed as if a wet wing brushed my shoulder. I opened my eyes. It was Jamila. She had come from the river, her dress was cool and damp. She stopped, looked round anxiously, and sat down beside Daniyar.

"Daniyar, I've come, I've come to you myself," she said softly.

All was silence. A bolt of lightning slipped earthward soundlessly.

"Are you angry? Are you very angry?"

Silence again. Then came the soft splash of a clump of loosened soil sliding into the water.

"Is it my fault? And it's not your fault, either."

Thunder rolled over the mountains. Jamila's profile was clearly etched in a flash of lightning. She clung to Daniyar. Her shoulders heaved convulsively within his embrace. Then she stretched out on the straw beside him.

A hot wind blew in from the steppe. It whirled the straw about, it crashed into a dilapidated tent at the edge of the threshing-floor and spun off like a crazy top down the road. Once again there was the dry crack of thunder and blue flashes pierced the clouds. It was both frightening and exciting--a storm was coming, the last storm of summer.

"Did you think I would prefer him to you?" Jamila whispered passionately. "Never, never, never! He never loved me. He even sent me his regards as a postscript. I don't need him or his love that has come too late, and I don't care what people will say! My lonely darling, I'll never let you go! I've loved you for a long time. I loved you and waited for you even before I knew you and you came, as if you knew that I was waiting for you! "

Crooked light-blue flashes of lightning plunged into the river near the cliff. Slanting icy raindrops pattered on the straw.

"Jamila, my beloved Jamila!" Daniyar whispered, calling her by every loving Kazakh and Kirghiz name. "I, too, have loved you for a long time. I dreamed of you in the trenches and I knew that my love was in my native land. It was you, my Jamila! Turn round and let me look into your eyes!"

The storm was upon us.

The felt covering was wrenched off the tent and flapped like a wounded bird. The rain, whipped from below by the wind, came down in torrents and seemed to be kissing the earth. Peals of thunder rolled across the sky like an avalanche. Bright flashes of lightning illuminated the mountains, the wind howled and raged in the ravine.

It was pouring. I lay hidden in the straw, feeling my own heart racing in my breast. I was happy. I felt as one who has come out into the sunshine after a long illness. Both the rain and the flashes of lightning reached me beneath the straw, but I was content and fell asleep with a smile, uncertain of whether the sound I heard was the subsiding rustling in the straw or Daniyar and Jamila whispering.

The rainy season was close at hand. It would soon be autumn. There was the damp autumn smell of wormwood and wet straw in the air. What awaited us in the autumn? For some reason or other, I did not think about that then.

That autumn, after a two-year break, I went back to school. After lessons were over I often came to the steep river bank and sat beside the now dead and deserted threshing-floor. Here I drew my first sketches. I recall that even then I realised my work was far from good.

"These paints are no good! If only I had *real* paints!" I would say, though I had no idea of what "real" paints should be like. It was not until much later that I discovered the existence of real oil paints in little tubes. Be that as it may, my teachers were right it seemed: I needed tutoring. However, it was only a dream, for there was still no word from my brothers, and my mother would never have let me, her only son and the *djigit* and breadwinner of two families, go away to study. I dared not even bring up the subject. As if to make things harder for me the autumn that year was so beautiful, it cried to be painted.

The icy Kurkureu became shallow, the tops of the stones at the rapids were covered with dark-green and orange moss. The tender, naked stems of the rose-willows appeared red in the early frosts, but the small poplars still retained their firm, short yellow leaves.

The smoky, rain-drenched herdsmen's tents were black spots on the reddish after-grass of the flood-meadow; ribbons of acrid blue smoke curled over the smoke holes. The lean stallions whinnied loudly, the mares were drifting away and it would be difficult to keep them in herds till the spring. Flocks of cattle that had come down from the mountains wandered over the stubble. The dry, darkened steppe was criss-crossed by trampled paths.

Soon the steppe wind began to blow, the sky became muddy and the cold rains, the forerunners of snow, began. One fairly pleasant day I went down to the river, attracted by a fiery bush of mountain ash growing on a sandbar. I sat down among the rose-willows, not far from the ford. Evening was falling. Suddenly I saw two people. They had probably crossed the ford. They were Daniyar and Jamila. I could not tear my eyes from their tense, yet determined faces. Daniyar had a knapsack slung over his shoulder; he walked quickly, and the flaps of his open greatcoat hit against the tops of his worn tarpaulin boots. Jamila had tied a white kerchief around her head and it had slid back. She wore her best print dress, the one she liked to show off in during Fair days, and a quilted corduroy jacket over it. In one hand she carried a small bundle and hung on to a strap of Daniyar's knapsack with the other. They were talking.

They followed the path across the ravine through the thicket of needle grass. I watched them, not knowing what to do. Should I call to them? But I could not utter a sound.

The last crimson rays slipped over the quick-moving clouds above the mountain range, and it began to get dark fast. Daniyar and Jamila never once turned back as they walked towards the railroad siding. Their heads bobbed in the thicket once or twice and then disappeared completely.

"Jamila-a-a-a!" I shouted at the top of my voice.

"A-a-a!" came the forlorn echo.

"Jamila-a-a-a!" I shouted again and ran after them madly across the river.

Sprays of icy drops hit my face. My clothes were drenched, but I ran on, not seeing the ground beneath my feet. Then I tripped and fell. I lay there without raising my head with the hot tears streaming down my face. The darkness seemed to weigh down upon my shoulders. I could hear the thin stems of needle grass wailing mournfully.

"Jamila! Jamila!" I sobbed.

I was saying good-bye to the two people closest and dearest to me. And as I lay there on the ground I suddenly realised that I loved Jamila. Yes, she was my first love, the love of my childhood.

I lay there for a long time, my head buried in my wet arm. I was saying good-bye to more than Jamila and Daniyar--I was saying good-bye to my childhood.

When I finally straggled home at dark, there was a great commotion in the yard; stirrups jangled, people were saddling their

horses, and a drunken Osmon was prancing about on his steed, bellowing at the top of his voice:

"We should've chased that stray mongrel from the village long ago! It's a disgrace to our whole kin! If I ever lay eyes on him, I'll kill him on the spot! And I don't care if I'm jailed for it--I won't permit every passing tramp to steal our women! Come on, *djigits,* he won't get away, we'll catch him at the station!"

My blood froze: which road would they take? But once I was sure they had taken the highroad to the station and not the one to the siding, I slipped into the house and curled up under my father's sheepskin coat, covering my head so no one could see my tears.

How much talk and gossip there was in the village after that! The women vied with each other in condemning Jamila.

"She's a fool to have left such a family and trampled her happiness!"

"I wonder what attracted her to this pauper?"

"Don't worry, the little beauty will come to her senses, but it'll be too late then."

"That's what I say! And what's wrong with Sadyk? Isn't he a good husband and provider? Why, he's the best *djigit* in the village!"

"And what about her mother-in-law? It's not many who have a mother-in-law like that! You'd have to look far and wide for another such *baibiche!* The little fool has ruined her life for no good reason at all!"

Perhaps I was the only one who did not condemn Jamila, my former *djene.* I, for one, knew that in his soul Daniyar was richer than any of us. No, I could not believe that Jamila would be unhappy with him. But I felt sorry for my mother. It seemed that when Jamila left, her former strength abandoned her also. She looked forlorn and haggard, and, as I now realise, she could not accept the fact that Fate could break all the old patterns so forcefully. If a great tree is uprooted by a storm it will never rise again. Before, my mother's pride would never have permitted her to ask anyone to thread a needle for her. But one day I came home from school and saw that her hands were trembling, that she could not see the needle's eye and was weeping.

"Here, thread it for me," she asked and sighed heavily. .Jamila will come to no good end. Ah, what a housekeeper she would have made! But she's gone. She's renounced us. Why did she go? Was she so badly off here?"

I wanted to embrace my mother and reassure her, to tell her what

sort of a person Daniyar really was, but I did not dare to, for I would have insulted her terribly.

But one day the innocent part I had played in the whole affair ceased to be a secret.

Soon Sadyk returned. Naturally, he grieved, though when drunk he said to Osmon:

"Good riddance, if she's gone! She'll die in the gutter someplace. There's enough women to go around. Even a golden-haired one isn't worth the puniest of fellows."

"Sure!" Osmon answered. "I'm just sorry I didn't catch him, 'cause I would've killed him on the spot! And as for her, I'd have tied her hair to my horse's tail! They've probably gone south, to the cotton farms, or else to the Kazakhs. It's not the first time he's tramped about! But I just can't get it through my head--how could it have happened in the first place? Nobody knew a thing, and who would have ever suspected it? The bitch fixed it all up herself! If I could only lay my hands on her!"

I felt like saying: "You can't forget how she slighted you, back in the field. What a mean and petty soul you have!"

One day I was sitting at home, doing a picture for our school newspaper. My mother was fussing about the stove. Suddenly, Sadyk burst into the room, He was pale and his eyes were narrowed viciously as he ran up to me and shoved a piece of paper in my face.

"Did you do this?"

I was struck dumb. It was my first drawing. Daniyar and Jamila seemed alive as they looked at me from the sheet of paper.

"Yes, I did."

"Who's this?" he said, poking the page.

"Daniyar."

"Traitor!" Sadyk screamed.

He tore the drawing to bits and stamped out, banging the door behind him.

After a long and depressing silence my mother asked:

"Did you know about it?"

"Yes."

She stood there, leaning against the stove, looking at me with dismay and reproach. And when I said: "I'll draw them again!" she shook her head sadly.

I looked at the scraps of paper lying on the floor, a hurt I could not endure choking me. Let them think I was a traitor. Whom had I betrayed? My family? My kin? But I had not betrayed the truth of life,

the truth of these two people! I could not say this, for even my own mother would not understand.

Everything swam before my eyes, it seemed that the bits of paper were alive and moving about the floor. The memory of Daniyar and Jamila looking at me from the paper was so vivid that suddenly I seemed to hear Daniyar's song, the one he had sung that memorable August night. Recalling their departure from the village, an irresistible desire to take to the road rose within me. I would go as they had, firmly and courageously, to enter upon the difficult road to happiness.

"I want to go away to study. Tell my father. I want to be an artist!" I said to my mother.

I was certain that she would begin to reproach me and weep, recalling my brothers who had died in the war. But, to my surprise, she did not weep. She said softly and sadly:

"If that's what you want to do. My fledglings have all grown strong and are flying off in their own directions. How are we to know how high you'll fly? Perhaps you're right. Go then. Maybe you'll change your mind when you get there. Drawing and smearing paint is no trade. You'll study and find out if it's so. And don't forget us."

From that day the Small House separated from us. Soon after I left to study.

That's all there is to the story.

After I graduated from art school I was recommended for the Academy, and my diploma work was a painting I had dreamed of for many years.

It is not difficult to guess that it was a painting of Daniyar and Jamila. They are seen walking along the autumn road across the steppe. Before them is the vast and bright horizon.

Though my painting is not perfect--for skill does not come all at once--I treasure it, for it is my first truly creative experience.

There are times when I am dissatisfied with my work. There are difficult moments when I lose faith in myself. At such times I am drawn to this painting that has become so dear to me, to Daniyar and Jamila. I gaze at them and each time speak to them.

"Where are you now, what roads are you treading? We have many new roads in the steppe across Kazakhstan, up to the Altai and through Siberia! Many brave people are working there. Perhaps you, too, are there? My Jamila, you left with never a backward glance. Perhaps you are tired, perhaps you have lost faith in yourself? Lean against Daniyar, let him sing you his song of love, of the earth, of life. May the steppe

reflect it and blossom in every hue and colour! May you recall that August night! Keep on, Jamila, never regret what you've done, for you have found your difficult happiness!"

As I look at them I hear Daniyar's voice. He is calling to me to set out, and that means it is time for me to prepare for the journey. I will cross the steppe to my native village and will find new colours there.

May my every brush-stroke resound with Daniyar's song! May my every brush-stroke echo the sound of Jamila's beating heart!

1958

See also: Aitmatov's Corner

Articles by Iraj Bashiri:
Aitmatov's Life
The Art of Chingiz Aitmatov's Stories
Aitmatov's Jamila: An Analysis
Aitmatov's Farewell, Gyulsary!: A Structural Analysis

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Socrates, Roman mural 1st century

The *Apology*

by Plato

I do not know, men of Athens, how my *17*
accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true. Of the many lies they told, one in particular surprised me, namely that you should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like me. That they were not ashamed to be immediately proved *b*
wrong by the facts, when I show myself not to be an accomplished speaker at all, that I thought was most shameless on their part—unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth. If they mean that, I would agree that I am an orator, but not after their manner, for indeed, as I say, practically nothing they said was true. From me you *c*
will hear the whole truth, though not, by Zeus, gentlemen, expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases like theirs, but things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind, for I put my trust in the justice of what I say, and let none of you expect anything else. It would not be fitting at my age, as it might be for a young man, to toy with words when I appear before you.

One thing I do ask and beg of you, gentlemen: if you hear me making my defence in the same kind of language as I am accustomed to use in the market place by the bankers' tables, where many of you have heard me, and elsewhere, do not be surprised or create a disturbance on that account. The position is this: this is my first appearance in a lawcourt, at the age of seventy; I am therefore *d*
simply a stranger to the manner of speaking here. Just as if I were really a stranger, you would certainly excuse me if I spoke in that dialect and manner in which I had been brought up, so too my present request seems a just one, for you to pay no attention to my manner of speech—be it *18*
better or worse—but to concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth.

It is right for me, gentlemen, to defend myself first against the first lying accusations made against me and my first accusers, and then against the later accusations and the later accusers. There have been many who have accused me to you for many years now, and none of their *b*
accusations are true. These I fear much more than I fear Anytus and his friends, though they too are formidable. These earlier ones, however, are more so, gentlemen; they got hold of most of you from childhood, persuaded you and accused me quite falsely, saying that there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger. Those who spread that rumour, gentlemen, are my dangerous accusers, for *c*
their hearers believe that those who study these things do not even believe in the gods. Moreover, these accusers are numerous, and have been at it a long time; also, they spoke to you at an age when you would most readily believe them, some of you being children and adolescents, and they won their case by default, as there was no defence.

What is most absurd in all this is that one cannot even know or mention their names unless one of them is a writer of comedies. Those who maliciously and slanderously persuaded you—who *d*
also, when persuaded themselves then persuaded others—all those are most difficult to deal with: one cannot bring one of them into court or refute him; one must simply fight with shadows, as it were, in making one's defence, and cross-examine when no one answers. I want you to realize too that my accusers are of two kinds: those who have accused me recently, and the old ones I mention; and to think that I must first defend myself against the latter, for you have also heard their accusations first, and to a much greater extent than the more recent. *e*

Very well then. I must surely defend myself and attempt to uproot from your minds in so short a time the slander that has resided there so long. I wish this may happen, if it is in any way better *19*
for you and me, and that my defence may be successful, but I think this is very difficult and I am fully aware of how difficult it is. Even so, let the matter proceed as the god may wish, but I must obey the law and make my defence.

Let us then take up the case from its beginning. What is the accusation from which arose the slander in which Meletus trusted when he wrote out the charge against me? What did they say *b*
when they slandered me? I must, as if they were my actual prosecutors, read the affidavit they would have sworn. It goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others. You have seen this yourselves in the comedy of Aristophanes, a Socrates swinging about there, saying he was walking on air and talking a lot *c*
of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing at all. I do not speak in contempt of such knowledge, if someone is wise in these things—lest Meletus bring more cases against me—but, gentlemen, I have no part in it, and on this point I call upon the majority of you as witnesses. I think it right that all those of you who have heard me conversing, and many of you have, should tell each other if anyone of you has ever heard me discussing such subjects to any extent at all. *d*
From this you will learn that the other things said about me by the majority are of the same kind.

Not one of them is true. And if you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach people and charge a fee for it, that is not true either. Yet I think it a fine thing to be able to teach people *e*
as Gorgias of Leontini does, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis.[1] Each of these men can go to any city and persuade the young, who can keep company with anyone of their own fellow-citizens they want without paying, to leave the company of these, to join with themselves, pay *20*
them a fee, and be grateful to them besides. Indeed, I learned that there is another wise man from Paros who is visiting us, for I met a man who has spent more money on Sophists than everybody else put together, Callias, the son of Hipponicus. So I asked him—he has two sons—"Callias," I said, "if your sons were colts or calves, we could find and engage a supervisor for them who would make them excel in their proper qualities, some horse breeder or farmer. Now since they are men, *b*
whom do you have in mind to supervise them? Who is an expert in this kind of excellence, the human and social kind? I think you must have given thought to this since you have sons. Is there such a person," I asked, "or is there not?" "Certainly there is," he said. "Who is he?" I asked, "What is his name, where is he from? and what is his fee?" "His name, Socrates, is Evenus, he comes from Paras, and his fee is five minas." I thought Evenus a happy man, if he really possesses *c*
this art, and teaches for so moderate a fee. Certainly I would pride and preen myself if I had this knowledge, but I do not have it, gentlemen.

One of you might perhaps interrupt me and say: "But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come? For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the common, all these rumours and talk would not have arisen unless you did something other than

1. These were all well-known Sophists

most people. Tell us what it is, that we may not speak inadvisedly about you." Anyone who says *d*
that seems to be right, and I will try to show you what has caused this reputation and slander.
Listen then. Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that all that I shall say is true.
What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom?
Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just
now are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not *e*
possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me. Do not create a disturbance,
gentlemen, even if you think I am boasting, for the story I shall tell does not originate with me, but
I will refer you to a trustworthy source. I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness to the
existence and nature of my wisdom, if it be such. You know Chairephon. He was my friend from
youth, and the friend of most of you, as he shared your exile and your return. You surely know the *21*
kind of man he was, how impulsive in any course of action. He went to Delphi at one time and
ventured to ask the oracle—as I say, gentlemen, do not create a disturbance—he asked if any man
was wiser than I, and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser. Chairephon is dead, but his
brother will testify to you about this.

Consider that I tell you this because I would inform you about the origin of the slander. When
I heard of this reply I asked myself: "Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very *b*
conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For
surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so." For a long time I was at a loss as to his
meaning; then I very reluctantly turned to some such investigation as this: I went to one of those
reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle and say to it: "This man
is wiser than I, but you said I was." Then, when I examined this man—there is no need for me to
tell you his name, he was one of our public men—my experience was something like this: I *c*
thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then
tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike
me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this *d*
man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something
when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be
wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." After this I
approached another man, one of those thought to be wiser than he, and I thought the same thing,
and so I came to be disliked both by him and by many others. *e*

After that I proceeded systematically. I realized, to my sorrow and alarm, that I was getting
unpopular, but I thought that I must attach the greatest importance to the god's oracle, so I must
go to all those who had any reputation for knowledge to examine its meaning. And by the dog,
gentlemen of the jury—for I must tell you the truth—I experienced something like this: in my
investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation were *22*
nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable.
I must give you an account of my journeyings as if they were labours I had undertaken to prove
the oracle irrefutable. After the politicians, I went to the poets, the writers of tragedies and
dithyrambs and the others, intending in their case to catch myself being more ignorant then they.
So I took up those poems with which they seemed to have taken most trouble and asked them what
they meant, in order that I might at the same time learn something from them. I am ashamed to tell *b*
you the truth, gentlemen, but I must. Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems
better than their authors could. I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with
knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say
many fine things without any understanding of what they say. The poets seemed to me to have had *c*
a similar experience. At the same time I saw that, because of their poetry, they thought themselves
very wise men in other respects, which they were not. So there again I withdrew, thinking that I
had the same advantage over them as I had over the politicians.

Finally I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew *d*
that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they
knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, gentlemen of the jury,
the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his
success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of
theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether
I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The *e*
answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am.
As a result of this investigation, gentlemen of the jury, I acquired much unpopularity, of a kind that
is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders came from these people and a reputation *23*
for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I
proved that my interlocutor did not have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is
wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that
when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: "This man
among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless." So *b*
even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone,
citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the
god and show him that he is not wise. Because of this occupation, I do not have the leisure to
engage in public affairs to any extent, nor indeed to look after my own, but I live in great poverty
because of my service to the god.

Furthermore, the young men who follow me around of their own free will, those who have
most leisure, the sons of the very rich, take pleasure in hearing people questioned; they themselves *c*
often imitate me and try to question others. I think they find an abundance of men who believe they
have some knowledge but know little or nothing. The result is that those whom they question are
angry, not with themselves but with me. They say: "That man Socrates is a pestilential fellow who
corrupts the young." If one asks them what he does and what he teaches to corrupt them, they are *d*
silent, as they do not know, but, so as not to appear at a loss, they mention those accusations that
are available against all philosophers, about "things in the sky and things below the earth," about
"not believing in the gods" and "making the worse the stronger argument;" they would not want
to tell the truth, I'm sure, that they have been proved to lay claim to knowledge when they know
nothing. These people are ambitious, violent and numerous; they are continually and convincingly
talking about me; they have been filling your ears for a long time with vehement slanders against
me. From them Meletus attacked me, and Anytus and Lycon, Meletus being vexed on behalf of *e*
the poets, Anytus on behalf of the craftsmen and the politicians, Lycon on behalf of the orators,
so that, as I started out by saying, I should be surprised if I could rid you of so much slander in so
short a time. That, gentlemen of the jury, is the truth for you. I have hidden or disguised nothing. *24*
I know well enough that this very conduct makes me unpopular, and this is proof that what I say
is true, that such is the slander against me, and that such are its causes. If you look into this either
now or later, this is what you will find. *b*

Let this suffice as a defence against the charges of my earlier accusers. After this I shall try
to defend myself against Meletus, that good and patriotic man, as he says he is, and my later
accusers. As these are a different lot of accusers, let us again take up their sworn deposition. It
goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods
in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things. Such is their charge. Let us examine
it point by point. *c*

He says that I am guilty of corrupting the young, but I say that Meletus is guilty of dealing
frivolously with serious matters, of irresponsibly bringing people into court, and of professing to
be seriously concerned with things about none of which he has ever cared, and I shall try to prove

that this is so. Come here and tell me, Meletus. Surely you consider it of the greatest importance *d*
that our young men be as good as possible? —Indeed I do.

Come then, tell the jury who improves them. You obviously know, in view of your concern. You say you have discovered the one who corrupts them, namely me, and you bring me here and accuse me to the jury. Come, inform the jury and tell them who it is. You see, Meletus, that you are silent and know not what to say. Does this not seem shameful to you and a sufficient proof of what I say, that you have not been concerned with any of this? Tell me, my good sir, who improves our young men? —The laws. *e*

That is not what I am asking, but what person who has knowledge of the laws to begin with?—These jurymen, Socrates.

How do you mean, Meletus? Are these able to educate the young and improve them?—Certainly.

All of them, or some but not others?—All of them.

Very good, by Hera. You mention a great abundance of benefactors. But what about the audience? Do they improve the young or not?—They do, too. *25*

What about the members of Council?—The Councillors, also.

But, Meletus, what about the assembly? Do members of the assembly corrupt the young, or do they all improve them?—They improve them.

All the Athenians, it seems, make the young into fine good men, except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is that what you mean?—That is most definitely what I mean.

You condemn me to a great misfortune. Tell me: does this also apply to horses do you think? *b*
That all men improve them and one individual corrupts them? Or is quite the contrary true, one individual is able to improve them, or very few, namely the horse breeders, whereas the majority, if they have horses and use them, corrupt them? Is that not the case, Meletus, both with horses and all other animals? Of course it is, whether you and Anytus say so or not. It would be a very happy state of affairs if only one person corrupted our youth, while the others improved them.

You have made it sufficiently obvious, Meletus, that you have never had any concern for our *c*
youth; you show your indifference clearly; that you have given no thought to the subjects about which you bring me to trial.

And by Zeus, Meletus, tell us also whether it is better for a man to live among good or wicked fellow-citizens. Answer, my good man, for I am not asking a difficult question. Do not the wicked do some harm to those who are ever closest to them, whereas good people benefit them?—Certainly.

And does the man exist who would rather be harmed than benefited by his associates? Answer, *d*
my good sir, for the law orders you to answer. Is there any man who wants to be harmed? —Of course not.

Come now, do you accuse me here of corrupting the young and making them worse deliberately or unwillingly?—Deliberately.

What follows, Meletus? Are you so much wiser at your age than I am at mine that you understand that wicked people always do some harm to their closest neighbors while good people *e*
do them good, but I have reached such a pitch of ignorance that I do not realize this, namely that if I make one of my associates wicked I run the risk of being harmed by him so that I do such a great evil deliberately, as you say? I do not believe you, Meletus, and I do not think anyone else *26*
will. Either I do not corrupt the young or, if I do, it is unwillingly, and you are lying in either case. Now if I corrupt them unwillingly, the law does not require you to bring people to court for such unwilling wrongdoings, but to get hold of them privately, to instruct them and exhort them; for clearly, if I learn better, I shall cease to do what I am doing unwillingly. You, however, have avoided my company and were unwilling to instruct me, but you bring me here, where the law requires one to bring those who are in need of punishment, not of instruction.

And so, gentlemen of the jury, what I said is clearly true: Meletus has never been at all *b*
concerned with these matters. Nonetheless tell us, Meletus, how you say that I corrupt the young; or is it obvious from your deposition that it is by teaching them not to believe in the gods in whom the city believes but in other new spiritual things? Is this not what you say I teach and so corrupt them? —That is most certainly what I do say.

Then by those very gods about whom we are talking, Meletus, make this clearer to me and to the jury: I cannot be sure whether you mean that I teach the belief that there are some gods—and therefore I myself believe that there are gods and am not altogether an atheist, nor am I guilty of *c*
that—not, however, the gods in whom the city believes, but others, and that this is the charge against me, that they are others. Or whether you mean that I do not believe in gods at all, and that this is what I teach to others. —This is what I mean, that you do not believe in gods at all.

You are a strange fellow, Meletus. Why do you say this? Do I not believe, as other men do, that the sun and the moon are gods?—No, by Zeus, jurymen, for he says that the sun is stone, and *d*
the moon earth.

My dear Meletus, do you think you are prosecuting Anaxagoras? Are you so contemptuous of the jury and think them so ignorant of letters as not to know that the books of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae are full of those theories, and further, that the young men learn from me what they can buy from time to time for a drachma, at most, in the bookshops, and ridicule Socrates if he pretends that these theories are his own, especially as they are so absurd? Is that, by Zeus, what *e*
you think of me, Meletus, that I do not believe that there are any gods? —That is what I say, that you do not believe in the gods at all.

You cannot be believed, Meletus, even, I think, by yourself. The man appears to me, gentlemen of the jury, highly insolent and uncontrolled. He seems to have made this deposition out of insolence, violence and youthful zeal. He is like one who composed a riddle and is trying it out: "Will the wise Socrates realize that I am jesting and contradicting myself, or shall I deceive him and others?" I think he contradicts himself in the affidavit, as if he said: "Socrates is guilty of *27*
not believing in gods but believing in gods," and surely that is the part of a jester!

Examine with me, gentlemen, how he appears to contradict himself, and you, Meletus, answer us. Remember, gentlemen, what I asked you when I began, not to create a disturbance if I proceed in my usual manner. *b*

Does any man, Meletus, believe in human activities who does not believe in humans? Make him answer, and not again and again create a disturbance. Does any man who does not believe in horses believe in horsemen's activities? Or in flute-playing activities but not in flute-players? No, my good sir, no man could. If you are not willing to answer, I will tell you and the jury. Answer the next question, however. Does any man believe in spiritual activities who does not believe in spirits?—No one. *c*

Thank you for answering, if reluctantly, when the jury made you. Now you say that I believe in spiritual things and teach about them, whether new or old, but at any rate spiritual things according to what you say, and to this you have sworn in your deposition. But if I believe in spiritual things I must quite inevitably believe in spirits. Is that not so? It is indeed. I shall assume that you agree, as you do not answer. Do we not believe spirits to be either gods or the children of gods? Yes or no?—Of course. *d*

Then since I do believe in spirits, as you admit, if spirits are gods, this is what I mean when I say you speak in riddles and in jest, as you state that I do not believe in gods and then again that I do, since I do believe in spirits. If on the other hand the spirits are children of the gods, bastard children of the gods by nymphs or some other mothers, as they are said to be, what man would believe children of the gods to exist, but not gods? That would be just as absurd as to believe the young of horses and asses, namely mules, to exist, but not to believe in the existence of horses and *e*
asses. You must have made this deposition, Meletus, either to test us or because you were at a loss

to find any true wrongdoing of which to accuse me. There is no way in which you could persuade anyone of even small intelligence that it is possible for one and the same man to believe in spiritual but not also in divine things, and then again for that same man to believe neither in spirits nor in gods nor in heroes. *28*

I do not think, gentlemen of the jury, that it requires a prolonged defence to prove that I am not guilty of the charges in Meletus' deposition, but this is sufficient. On the other hand, you know that what I said earlier is true, that I am very unpopular with many people. This will be my undoing, if I am undone, not Meletus or Anytus but the slanders and envy of many people. This has destroyed many other good men and will, I think, continue to do so. There is no danger that *b* it will stop at me.

Someone might say: 'Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have followed the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?" However, I should be right to reply to him: "You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man." According to your view, all the heroes who died at Troy were inferior people, especially the son of Thetis[2] who was so contemptuous of danger *c* compared with disgrace. When he was eager to kill Hector, his goddess mother warned him, as I believe, in some such words as these: "My child, if you avenge the death of your comrade, Patroclus, and you kill Hector, you will die yourself, for your death is to follow immediately after Hector's." Hearing this, he despised death and danger and was much more afraid to live a coward who did not avenge his friends. "Let me die at once," he said, "when once I have given the *d* wrongdoer his deserts, rather than remain here, a laughing-stock by the curved ships, a burden upon the earth." Do you think he gave thought to death and danger?

This is the truth of the matter, gentlemen of the jury: wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace. It would have been a dreadful way to behave, gentlemen of the jury, if, at Potidaea, Amphipolis and Delium, I had, at the risk of death, like anyone else, remained at my post where those you had elected to command *e* had ordered me, and then, when the god ordered me, as I thought and believed, to live "the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others, I had abandoned my post for fear of death or anything else. That would have been a dreadful thing, and then I might truly have justly been brought here for not believing that there are gods, disobeying the oracle, fearing death, and thinking I was wise *29* when I was not. To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if *b* I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this that as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have. I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man. I shall never fear or avoid things of which I do not know, whether they may not be good rather than things that I know to be bad. Even if you acquitted me now and did not believe Anytus, who said to you that either I should not have been brought here in the first place, or that now I am here, you cannot *c* avoid executing me, for if I should be acquitted, your sons would practise the teachings of Socrates and all be thoroughly corrupted; if you said to me in this regard: "Socrates, we do not believe

2. *i.e., Achilles*

Anytus now; we acquit you, but only on condition that you spend no more time on this investigation and do not practise philosophy, and if you are caught doing so you will die;" if, as I say, you were to acquit me on those terms, I would say to you: "Gentlemen of the jury, I am *d*
grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practise philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to anyone of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honours as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth or the best possible state of your soul?" Then, if one of you *e*
disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness that he says he has, I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things. I shall treat in this way anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger, and more so the citizens because you are more kindred to me. Be sure *30*
that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes *b*
wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively."

Now if by saying this I corrupt the young, this advice must be harmful, but if anyone says that I give different advice, he is talking nonsense. On this point I would say to you, gentlemen of the jury: "Whether you believe Anytus or not, whether you acquit me or not, do so on the understanding that this is my course of action, even if I am to face death many times." Do not *c*
create a disturbance, gentlemen, but abide by my request not to cry out at what I say but to listen, for I think it will be to your advantage to listen, and I am about to say other things at which you will perhaps cry out. By no means do this. Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he might kill me, or perhaps banish or disfranchise me, which he and maybe others think *d*
to be great harm, but I do not think so. I think he is doing himself much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly. Indeed, gentlemen of the jury, I am far from making it defence now on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god's gift to you by condemning me; for if you kill me *e*
you will not easily find another like me. I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and everyone of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company.

Another such man will not easily come to be among you, gentlemen, and if you believe me you *31*
will spare me. You might easily be annoyed with me as people are when they are aroused from a doze, and strike out at me; if convinced by Anytus you could easily kill me, and then you could sleep on for the rest of your days, unless the god, in his care for you, sent you someone else. That I am the kind of person to be a gift of the god to the city you might realize from the fact that it does not seem like human nature for me to have neglected all my own affairs and to have tolerated this neglect now for so many years while I was always concerned with you, approaching each one of *b*
you like a father or an elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue (*aretē*). Now if I profited from this by charging a fee for my advice, there would be some sense to it, but you can see for yourselves that, for all their shameless accusations, my accusers have not been able in their

impudence to bring forward a witness to say that I have ever received a fee or ever asked for one. *c*
I, on the other hand, have a convincing witness that I speak the truth, my poverty.

It may seem strange that while I go around and give this advice privately and interfere in private affairs, I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city. You have heard me give the reason for this in many places. I have a divine or spiritual sign which Meletus has ridiculed in his deposition. This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything. This *d*
is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to prevent me. Be sure, gentlemen of the jury, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice *e*
must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.

I shall give you great proofs of this, not words but what you esteem, deeds. Listen to what *32*
happened to me, that you may know that I will not yield to any man contrary to what is right, for fear of death, even if I should die at once for not yielding. The things I shall tell you are commonplace and smack of the lawcourts, but they are true. I have never held any other office in the city, but I served as a member of the Council, and our tribe Antiochis was presiding at the time when you wanted to try as a body the ten generals who had failed to pick up the survivors of the naval battle.[3] This was illegal, as you all recognized later. I was the only member of the presiding *b*
committee to oppose your doing something contrary to the laws, and I voted against it. The orators were ready to prosecute me and take me away; and your shouts were egging them on, but I thought I should run any risk on the side of law and justice rather than join you, for fear of prison or death, when you were engaged in an unjust course.

This happened when the city was still a democracy. When the oligarchy was established, the Thirty[4] summoned me to the Hall, along with four others, and ordered us to bring Leon from *c*
Salamis, that he might be executed. They gave many such orders to many people, in order to implicate as many as possible in their guilt. Then I showed again, not in words but in action, that, if it were not rather vulgar to say so, death is something I couldn't care less about, but that my whole concern is not to do anything unjust or impious. That government, powerful as it was, did *d*
not frighten me into any wrongdoing. When we left the Hall, the other four went to Salamis and brought in Leon, but I went home. I might have been put to death for this, had not the government fallen shortly afterwards. There are many who will witness to these events.

Do you think I would have survived all these years if I were engaged in public affairs and, *e*
acting as a good man must, came to the help of justice and considered this the most important thing? Far from it, gentlemen of the jury, nor would any other man. Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life. I have never come to an agreement with anyone to act unjustly, neither with anyone else nor with anyone of those who they slanderously say are my pupils. I have never been anyone's teacher. If anyone, young or *33*
old, desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns, I have never begrudged this to anyone, but I do not converse when I receive a fee and not when I do not. I am equally ready to question the rich and the poor if anyone is willing to answer my questions and

b

3. This was the battle of Arginusae (south of Lesbos) in 406 BC., the last Athenian victory of the war. A violent storm prevented the Athenians from rescuing the survivors. For this they were tried in Athens and sentenced to death by the assembly.

4. This was the harsh oligarchy that was set up after the final defeat of Athens in 404 BC. and that ruled Athens for some nine months in 404-3 before the democracy was restored.

listen to what I say. And I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so. If anyone says that he has learned anything from me, or that he heard anything privately that the others did not hear, be assured that he is not telling the truth.

Why then do some people enjoy spending considerable time in my company? You have heard why, gentlemen of the jury, I have told you the whole truth. They enjoy hearing those being questioned who think they are wise, but are not. And this is not unpleasant. To do this has, as I say, *c*
been enjoined upon me by the god, by means of oracles and dreams, and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man to do anything. This is true, gentlemen, and can easily be established.

If I corrupt some young men and have corrupted others, then surely some of them who have grown older and realized that I gave them bad advice when they were young should now themselves come up here to accuse me and avenge themselves. If they were unwilling to do so *d*
themselves, then some of their kindred, their fathers or brothers or other relations should recall it now if their family had been harmed by me. I see many of these present here, first Crito, my contemporary and fellow demesman, the father of Critoboulos here; next Lysanias of Sphettus, the father of Aeschines here; also Antiphon the Cephisian, the father of Epigenes; and others whose brothers spent their time in this way; Nicostratus, the son of Theozotides, brother of Theodotus, and Theodotus has died so he could not influence him; Paralios here, son of Demodocus, whose *e*
brother was Theages; there is Adeimanttls, son of Ariston, brother of Plato here; Acantidorus, brother of Apollodorus here.

I could mention many others, some one of whom surely Meletus should have brought in as witness in his own speech. If he forgot to do so, then let him do it now; I will yield time if he has *34*
anything of the kind to say. You will find quite the contrary, gentlemen. These men are all ready to come to the help of the corruptor, the man who has harmed their kindred, as Meletus and Anytus say. Now those who were corrupted might well have reason to help me, but the uncorrupted, their kindred who are older men, have no reason to help me except the right and proper one, that they know that Meletus is lying and that I am telling the truth.

Very well, gentlemen of the jury. This, and maybe other similar things, is what I have to say *b*
in my defence. Perhaps one of you might be angry as he recalls that when he himself stood trial on a less dangerous charge, he begged and pleaded and implored the jury with many tears, that he brought his children and many of his friends and family into court to arouse as much pity as he could, but that I do none of these things, even though I may seem to be running the ultimate risk. Thinking of this, he might feel resentful toward me and, angry about this, cast his vote in anger. *c*
If there is such a one among you—I do not deem there is, but if there is—I think it would be right to say in reply: My good sir, I too have a household and, in Homer's phrase, I am not born "from oak or rock" but from men, so that I have a family, indeed three sons, gentlemen of the jury, of whom one is an adolescent while two are children. Nevertheless, I will not beg you to acquit me *d*
by bringing them here. Why do I do none of these things? Not through arrogance, gentlemen, nor through lack of respect for you. Whether I am brave in the face of death is another matter, but with regard to my reputation and yours and that of the whole city, it does not seem right to me to do these things, especially at my age and with my reputation. For it is generally believed, whether it be true or false, that in certain respects Socrates is superior to the majority of men. Now if those *e*
of you who are considered superior, be it in wisdom or courage or whatever other virtue makes them so, are seen behaving like that, it would be a disgrace. Yet I have often seen them do this sort of thing when standing trial, men who are thought to be somebody, doing amazing things as if they thought it a terrible thing to die, and as if they were to be immortal if you did not execute them. *35*
I think these men bring shame upon the city so that a stranger, too, would assume that those who are outstanding in virtue among the Athenians, whom they themselves select from themselves to

fill offices of state and receive other honours, are in no way better than women. You should not act like that, gentlemen of the jury, those of you who have any reputation at all, and if we do, you should not allow it. You should make it very clear that you will more readily convict a man who performs these pitiful dramatics in court and so makes the city a laughingstock, than a man who keeps quiet. *b*

Quite apart from the question of reputation, gentlemen, I do not think it right to supplicate the jury and to be acquitted because of this but to teach and persuade them. It is not the purpose of a juryman's office to give justice as a favour to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law, and this he has sworn to do. We should not accustom you to perjure yourselves, nor should you make a habit of it. This is irreverent conduct for either of us. *c*

Do not deem it right for me, gentlemen of the jury, that I should act towards you in a way that I do not consider to be good or just or pious, especially, by Zeus, as I am being prosecuted by Meletus here for impiety; clearly, if I convinced you by my supplication to do violence to your oath of office, I would be teaching you not to believe that there are gods, and my defence would convict me of hot believing in them. This is far from being the case, gentlemen, for I do believe in them as none of my accusers do. I leave it to you and the god to judge me in the way that will be best for me and for you. *d*

[The jury now gives its verdict of guilty, and Meletus asks for the penalty of death.]

There are many other reasons for my not being angry with you for convicting me, gentlemen of the jury, and what happened was not unexpected. I am much more surprised at the number of votes cast on each side, for I did not think the decision would be by so few votes but by a great many. As it is, a switch of only thirty votes would have acquitted me. I think myself that I have been cleared on Meletus' charges, and not only this, but it is clear to all that, if Anytus and Lycon had not joined him in accusing me, he would have been fined a thousand drachmas for not receiving a fifth of the votes. *e* *36*

He assesses the penalty at death. So be it. What counter-assessment should I propose to you, gentlemen of the jury? Clearly it should be a penalty I deserve, and what do I deserve to suffer or to pay because I have deliberately not led a quiet life but have neglected what occupies most people: wealth, household affairs, the position of general or public orator or the other offices, the political clubs and factions that exist in the city? I thought myself too honest to survive if I occupied myself with those things. I did not follow that path that would have made me of no use either to you or to myself, but I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit, by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible, not to care for the city's possessions more than for the city itself, and to care for other things in the same way. What do I deserve for being such a man? Some good, gentlemen of the jury, if I must truly make an assessment according to my deserts, and something suitable. What is suitable for a poor benefactor who needs leisure to exhort you? Nothing is more suitable, gentlemen, than for such a man to be fed in the Prytaneum,[5] much more suitable for him than for anyone of you who has won a victory at Olympia with a pair or a team of horses. The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy; I make you be happy. Besides, he does not need food, but I do. So if I must make a just assessment of what I deserve, I assess it at this: free meals in the Prytaneum. *b* *c* *d*

When I say this you may think, as when I spoke of appeals to pity and entreaties, that I speak arrogantly, but that is not the case, gentlemen of the jury; rather it is like this: I am convinced that I never willingly wrong anyone, but I am not convincing you of this, for we have talked together *e* *37*

5. The Prytaneum was the magistrates' hall or town hall of Athens. Free meals at the Prytaneum was the reward given to the victorious Olympic athletes.

but a short time. If it were the law with us, as it is elsewhere, that a trial for life should not last one but many days, you would be convinced, but now it is not easy to dispel great slanders in a short time. Since I am convinced that I wrong no one, I am not likely to wrong myself, to say that I *b* deserve some evil and to make some such assessment against myself. What should I fear? That I should suffer the penalty Meletus has assessed against me, of which I say I do not know whether it is good or bad? Am I then to choose in preference to this something that I know very well to be an evil and assess the penalty at that? Imprisonment? Why should I live in prison, always subjected to the ruling magistrates the Eleven? A fine, and imprisonment until I pay it? That would be the *c* same thing for me, as I have no money. Exile? for perhaps you might accept that assessment.

I should have to be inordinately fond of life, gentlemen of the jury, to be so unreasonable as to suppose that other men will easily tolerate my company and conversation when you, my fellow citizens, have been unable to endure them, but found them a burden and resented them so that you are now seeking to get rid of them. Far from it, gentlemen. It would be a fine life at my age to be *d* driven out of one city after another, for I know very well that wherever I go the young men will listen to my talk as they do here. If I drive them away, they will themselves persuade their elders to drive me out; if I do not drive them away, their fathers and relations will drive me out on their *e* behalf.

Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for man, you will believe me even less. *38*

What I say is true, gentlemen, but it is not easy to convince you. At the same time, I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any penalty. If I had money. I would assess the penalty at the amount I could pay, for that would not hurt me, but I have none, unless you are willing to set the penalty at the amount I can pay, and perhaps I could pay you one mina of silver. So that is my assessment. *b*

Plato here, gentlemen of the jury, and Crito and Critobulus and Apollodorus bid me put the penalty at thirty minae, and they will stand surety for the money. Well then, that is my assessment, and they will be sufficient guarantee of payment.

[The jury now votes again and sentences Socrates to death.]

It is for the sake of a short time, gentlemen of the jury, that you will acquire the reputation and the guilt, in the eyes of those who want to denigrate the city, of having killed Socrates, a wise man, for they who want to revile you will say that I am wise even if I am not. If you had waited but a little while, this would have happened of its own accord. You see my age, that I am already *c* advanced in years and close to death. I am saying this not to all of you but to those who condemned me to death, and to these same jurors I say: Perhaps you think that I was convicted for lack of such words as might have convinced you, if I thought I should say or do all I could to avoid my sentence. Far from it. I was convicted because I lacked not words but boldness and *d* shamelessness and the willingness to say to you what you would most gladly have heard from me, lamentations and tears and my saying and doing many things that I say are unworthy of me but that you are accustomed to hear from others. I did not think then that the danger I ran should make me do anything mean, nor do I now regret the nature of my defence. I would much rather die after this kind of defence than live after making the other kind. Neither I nor any other man should, on trial *e* or in war, contrive to avoid death at any cost. Indeed it is often obvious in battle that one could escape death by throwing away one's weapons and by turning to supplicate one's pursuers, and there are many ways to avoid death in every kind of danger if one will venture to do or say *39*

anything to avoid it. It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen of the jury, it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death. Slow and elderly as I am, I have been caught by the slower pursuer, whereas my accusers, being clever and sharp, have been caught by the quicker, wickedness. I leave you now, condemned to death by you, but they are condemned *b* by truth to wickedness and injustice. So I maintain my assessment, and they maintain theirs. This perhaps had to happen, and I think it is as it should be.

Now I want to prophesy to those who convicted me, for I am at the point when men prophesy most, when they are about to die. I say gentlemen, to those who voted to kill me, that vengeance will come upon you immediately after my death, a vengeance much harder to bear than that which *c* you took in killing me. You did this in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. There will be more people to test you, whom I now held back, but you did not notice it. They will be more difficult to deal with as they will be younger and you will resent them more. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape *d* such tests is neither possible nor good, but it is best and easiest not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible. With this prophecy to you who convicted me, I part from you.

I should be glad to discuss what has happened with those who voted for my acquittal during the time that the officers of the court are busy and I do not yet have to depart to my death. So, gentlemen, stay with me awhile, for nothing prevents us from talking to each other while it is *e* allowed. To you, as being my friends, I want to show the meaning of what has occurred. A surprising thing has happened to me, judges—you I would rightly call judges. At all previous times my familiar prophetic power, my spiritual manifestation frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong, but now that, as you can see for yourselves, I *40* was faced with what one might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign has not opposed me, either when I left home at dawn, or when I came into court, or at any time that I was about to say something during my speech. Yet in other talks it often held me back in the middle of my speaking, but now it has opposed no word or deed of mine. What do I think is the reason for this? I will tell you. What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and *b* those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right.

Let us reflect in this way, too, that there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, *c* a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place. If it is complete lack of perception, like a dreamless sleep, then death would be a great advantage. For I think that if one had to pick out that night during which a man slept soundly and did not dream, put beside it the other nights and days of his life, and then see how many days and nights had been better and more *d* pleasant than that night, not only a private person but the great king would find them easy to count compared with the other days and nights. If death is like this I say it is an advantage, for all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night. If, on the other hand, death is a change from here to another place, and what we are told is true and all who have died are there, what greater *e* blessing could there be, gentlemen of the jury? If anyone arriving in Hades will have escaped from those who call themselves judges here, and will find those true judges who are said to sit in judgement there, Minos and Radamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus and the other demi-gods *41* who have been upright in their own life, would that be a poor kind of change? Again, what would one of you give to keep company with Orpheus and Musaeus,Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die many times if that is true. It would be a wonderful way for me to spend my time whenever I met Palamedes and Ajax, the son of Telamon, and any other of the men of old who died through an unjust conviction, to compare my experience with theirs. I think it would be pleasant. Most

important, I could spend my time testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to who among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not. *b*

What would one not give, gentlemen of the jury, for the opportunity to examine the man who led the great expedition against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, and innumerable other men and women one could mention. It would be an extraordinary happiness to talk with them, to keep company with them and examine them. In any case, they would certainly not put one to death for doing so. They are happier there than we are here in other respects, and for the rest of time they are deathless, if indeed what we are told is true. *c*

You too must be of good hope as regards death, gentlemen of the jury, and keep this one truth in mind, that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods. What has happened to me now has not happened of itself, but it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble. That is why my divine sign did not oppose me at any point. So I am certainly not angry with those who convicted me, or with my accusers. Of course that was not their purpose when they accused and convicted me, but they thought they were hurting me, and for this they deserve blame. This much I ask from them: when my sons grow up, avenge yourselves by, causing them the same kind of grief that I caused you, if you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue, or if they think they are somebody when they are nobody. Reproach them as I reproach you, that they do not care for the right things and think they are worthy when they are not worthy of anything. If you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also. *d* *e*

Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god. *42*

Plato. *Apology,* trans. G.M.A. Grube. Pp. 112.130 in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: from Thales to Aristotle,* 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000.

KEY TERMS

ῥήτορική
rhētorikē
rhetoric

διαλεκτική
dialektikē
dialectic

ψυχή
psychē
soul

ἀρετή
aretē
virtue

εἰρωνεία
eirōneia
irony

QUESTIONS

1. In the opening of the *Apology* how does Socrates contrast his form of speech with that of his accusers?

2. What is the Socratic method? How does irony function in the Socratic method?

3. What are the charges against Socrates? At the opening of his defense how does Socrates distinguish between two sets of accusers? Which accusers does he think will be harder to refute? Why?

4. What is the story Socrates tells the jury of the Athenians concerning what a friend is told by the oracle at Delphi? What was the point of this story?

5. According to Socrates what benefits for the individual and for the state come from the practice of philosophy? What did Socrates mean when he referred to himself as a "gadfly"?

6. Why does Socrates claim that his accusers will be more harmed by his execution than he?

7. Why doesn't Socrates employ emotional appeals to pity in order to save his life?

8. What is the jury's verdict and what do the accusers recommend as a proper penalty? What counterpenalty does Socrates propose for himself? Why does he propose this to be his just penalty?

9. Even though he may very well have avoided death, why does Socrates not choose prison, a fine, exile, or even silence as a counterpenalty? Why does Socrates say that "the unexamined life is not worth living?" What did he mean by this? Was he correct? Why or why not?

The Myth Of Sisyphus

An Absurd Reasoning

Absurdity and Suicide

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.

If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontologi-cal argument. Galileo, who held a scientific truth of great importance, abjured it with the greatest ease as soon as it endangered his life. In a certain sense, he did right.[1] That truth was not worth the stake. Whether the earth or the sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions. How to answer it? On all essential problems (I mean thereby those that run the risk of leading to death or those that intensify the

passion of living) there are probably but two methods of thought: the method of La Palisse and the method of Don Quixote. Solely the balance between evidence and lyricism can allow us to achieve simultaneously emotion and lucidity. In a subject at once so humble and so heavy with emotion, the learned and classical dialectic must yield, one can see, to a more modest attitude of mind deriving at one and the same time from common sense and understanding.

Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. The man himself is ignorant of it. One evening he pulls the trigger or jumps. Of an apartment-building manager who had killed himself I was told that he had lost his daughter five years before, that be bad changed greatly since, and that that experience had "undermined" him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined. Society has but little connection with such beginnings. The worm is in man's heart. That is where it must be sought. One must follow and understand this fatal game that leads from lucidity in the face of existence to flight from light.

There are many causes for a suicide, and generally the most obvious ones were not the most powerful. Rarely is suicide committed (yet the hypothesis is not excluded) through reflection. What sets off the crisis is almost always unverifiable. Newspapers often speak of "personal sorrows" or of "incurable illness." These explanations are plausible. But one would have to know whether a friend of the desperate man had not that very day addressed him indifferently. He is the guilty one. For that is enough to precipitate all the rancors and all the boredom still in suspension.[2]

But if it is hard to fix the precise instant, the subtle step when the mind opted for death, it is easier to deduce from the act itself the consequences it implies. In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it. Let's not go too far in such analogies, however, but rather return to everyday words. It is merely confessing that that "is not worth the trouble." Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is

habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinc—

tively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.

What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death.

The subject of this essay is precisely this relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd. The principle can be established that for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must determine his action. Belief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate his conduct. It is legitimate to wonder, clearly and without false pathos, whether a conclusion of this importance requires forsaking as rapidly as possible an incomprehensible condition. I am speaking, of course, of men inclined to be in harmony with themselves.

Stated clearly, this problem may seem both simple and insoluble. But it is wrongly assumed that simple questions involve answers that are no less simple and that evidence implies evidence. *A priori* and reversing the terms of the problem, just as one does or does not kill oneself, it seems that there are but two philosophical solutions, either yes or no. This would be too easy. But allowance must be made for those who, without concluding, continue questioning. Here I am only slightly indulging in irony: this is the majority. I notice also that those who answer “no” act as if they thought “yes.” As a matter of fact, if I accept the Nietzschean criterion, they think “yes” in one way or another. On the other hand, it often happens that those who commit suicide were assured of the meaning of life. These contradictions are constant. It may even be said that they have never been so keen as on this point where, on the contrary, logic seems so desirable. It is a

commonplace to compare philosophical theories and the behavior of those who profess them. But it must be said that of the thinkers who refused a meaning to life none except Kirilov who belongs to literature, Peregrinos who is born of legend,[3] and Jules Lequier who belongs to hypothesis, admitted his logic to the point of refusing that life. Schopenhauer is often cited, as a fit subject for laughter, because he praised suicide while seated at a well-set table. This is no subject for joking. That way of not taking the tragic seriously is not so grievous, but it helps to judge a man.

In the face of such contradictions and obscurities must we conclude that there is no relationship between the opinion one has about life and the act one commits to leave it? Let us not exaggerate in this direction. In a man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world. The body's judgment is as good as the mind's and the body shrinks from annihilation. We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us toward death, the body maintains its irreparable lead. In short, the essence of that contradiction lies in what I shall call the act of eluding because it is both less and more than diversion in the Pascalian sense. Eluding is the invariable game. The typical act of eluding, the fatal evasion that constitutes the third theme of this essay, is hope. Hope of another life one must "deserve" or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it.

Thus everything contributes to spreading confusion.

Hitherto, and it has not been wasted effort, people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these two judgments. One merely has to refuse to he misled by the confusions, divorces, and inconsistencies previously pointed out. One must brush everything aside and go straight to the real problem. One kills oneself because life is not worth living, that is certainly a truth yet an unfruitful one because it is a truism. But does that insult to existence, that flat denial in which it is plunged come from the fact that it has no meaning? Does its absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide—this is what must be clarified, hunted down, and elucidated while brushing aside all the rest. Does the Absurd dictate death? This problem must be given priority over others, outside all methods of thought and all

exercises of the disinterested mind. Shades of meaning, contradictions, the psychology that an "objective" mind can always introduce into all problems have no place in this pursuit and this passion. It calls simply for an unjust—in other words, logical—thought. That is not easy. It is always easy to be logical. It is almost impossible to be logical to the bitter end. Men who die by their own hand consequently follow to its conclusion their emotional inclination. Reflection on suicide gives me an opportunity to raise the only problem to interest me: is there a logic to the point of death? I cannot know unless I pursue, without reckless passion, in the sole light of evidence, the reasoning of which I am here suggesting the source. This is what I call an absurd reasoning. Many have begun it. I do not yet know whether or not they kept to it.

When Karl Jaspers, revealing the impossibility of constituting the world as a unity, exclaims: "This limitation leads me to myself, where I can no longer withdraw behind an objective point of view that I am merely representing, where neither I myself nor the existence of others can any longer become an object for me," he is evoking after many others those waterless deserts where thought reaches its confines. After many others, yes indeed, but how eager they were to get out of them! At that last crossroad where thought hesitates, many men have arrived and even some of the humblest. They then abdicated what was most precious to them, their life. Others, princes of the mind, abdicated likewise, but they initiated the suicide of their thought in its purest revolt. The real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions. Tenacity and acumen are privileged spectators of this inhuman show in which absurdity, hope, and death carry on their dialogue. The mind can then analyze the figures of that elementary yet subtle dance before illustrating them and reliving them itself.

Absurd Freedom

Now the main thing is done, I hold certain facts from which I cannot separate. What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject—this is what counts. I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion. I can refute everything in this world surrounding me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance and this divine equivalence which springs from anarchy. I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me—that is what I understand. And these two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack and which means nothing within the limits of my condition?

If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation. I cannot cross it out with a stroke of the pen. What I believe to be true I must therefore preserve. What

seems to me so obvious, even against me, I must support. And what constitutes the basis of that conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it? If therefore I want to preserve it, I can through a constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert. This is what, for the moment, I must remember. At this moment the absurd, so obvious and yet so hard to win, returns to a man's life and finds its home there. At this moment, too, the mind can leave the arid, dried-up path of lucid effort. That path now emerges in daily life. It encounters the world of the anonymous impersonal pronoun "one," but henceforth man enters in with his revolt and his lucidity. He has forgotten how to hope. This hell of the present is his Kingdom at last. All problems recover their sharp edge. Abstract evidence retreats before the poetry of forms and colors. Spiritual conflicts become embodied and return to the abject and magnificent shelter of man's heart. None of them is settled. But all are transfigured. Is one going to die, escape by the leap, rebuild a mansion of ideas and forms to one's own scale? Is one, on the contrary, going to take up the heart-rending and marvelous wager of the absurd? Let's make a final effort in this regard and draw all our conclusions. The body, affection, creation, action, human nobility will then resume their places in this mad world. At last man will again find there the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference on which he feeds his greatness.

Let us insist again on the method: it is a matter of persisting. At a certain point on his path the absurd man is tempted. History is not lacking in either religions or prophets, even without gods. He is asked to leap. All he can reply is that he doesn't fully understand, that it is not obvious. Indeed, he does not want to do anything but what he fully understands. He is assured that this is the sin of pride, but he does not understand the notion of sin; that perhaps hell is in store, but he has not enough imagination to visualize that strange future; that he is losing immortal life, but that seems to him an idle consideration. An attempt is made to get him to admit his guilt. He feels innocent. To tell the truth, that is all he feels—his irreparable innocence. This is what allows him everything. Hence, what he demands of himself is to live *solely* with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned: he wants to find out if it is possible to live *without appeal.*

Now I can broach the notion of suicide. It has already been felt what solution might be given. At this point the problem is reversed. It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. Just as danger provided man the unique opportunity of seizing awareness, so metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainly of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.

This is where it is seen to what a degree absurd experience is remote from suicide. It may be thought that suicide follows revolt—but wrongly. For it does not represent the logical outcome of revolt. It is just the contrary by the consent it presupposes. Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme. Everything is over and man returns to his essential history. His future, his unique and dreadful future—he sees and rushes toward it. In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death. It is, at the extreme limit of the condemned man's last thought, that shoelace that despite everything he sees a few yards away, on the very brink of his dizzying fall. The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death.

That revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it. The sight of human pride is

unequaled. No disparagement is of any use. That discipline that the mind imposes on itself, that will conjured up out of nothing, that face-to-face struggle have something exceptional about them. To impoverish that reality whose inhumanity constitutes man's majesty is tantamount to impoverishing him himself. I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone. At this juncture, I cannot conceive that a skeptical metaphysics can be joined to an ethics of renunciation.

Consciousness and revolt, these rejections are the contrary of renunciation. Everything that is indomitable and passionate in a human heart quickens them, on the contrary, with its own life. It is essential to die unrecon-ciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide is a repudi—ation. The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance. This is a first consequence.

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If I remain in that prearranged position which consists in drawing all the conclusions (and nothing else) involved in a newly discovered notion, I am faced with a second paradox. In order to remain faithful to that method, I have nothing to do with the problem of metaphysical liberty. Knowing whether or not man is free doesn't interest me. I can experience only my own freedom. As to it, I can have no general notions, but merely a few clear insights. The problem of "freedom as such" has no meaning, for it is linked in quite a different way with the problem of God. Knowing whether or not man is free involves knowing whether he can have a master. The absurdity peculiar to this problem comes from the fact that the very notion that makes the problem of freedom possible also takes away all its meaning. For in the presence of God there is less a problem of freedom than a problem of evil. You know the alternative: either we are not free and God the all-powerful is responsible for evil. Or we are free and responsible but God is not all powerful. All the scholastic subtleties have neither added anything to nor subtracted anything from the acuteness of this paradox.

This is why I cannot act lost in the glorification or the mere definition of a notion which eludes me and loses its meaning as soon as it goes beyond the frame of reference of my individual experience. I cannot understand what kind of freedom would be given me by a higher being. I have lost the sense of hierarchy. The only conception of freedom I can have is that of the prisoner or the individual in the midst of the State. The only one I know is freedom of thought and action. Now if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action. That privation of hope and future means an increase in man's availability.

Before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification (with regard to whom or what is not the question). He weighs his chances, he counts on "someday," his retirement or the labor of his sons. He still thinks that something in his life can be directed. In truth, he acts as if he were free, even if all the facts make a point of contradicting that liberty. But after the absurd, everything is upset. That idea that "I am," my way of acting as if everything has a meaning (even if, on occasion, I said that nothing has)—all that is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death. Thinking of the future, establishing aims for oneself, having preferences—all this presupposes a belief in freedom, even if one occasionally ascertains that one doesn't feel it. But at that moment I am well aware that that higher liberty, that freedom *to be,* which alone can serve as basis for a truth, does not exist. Death is there as the only reality. After death the chips are down. I am not even free, either, to perpetuate myself, but a slave, and, above all, a slave without hope of an eternal revolution, without recourse to contempt. And who without revolution and without contempt can remain a slave? What freedom can exist in the fullest sense without assurance of eternity?

But at the same time the absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living. In a certain sense, that hampered him. To the extent to which he imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty. Thus I could not act otherwise than as the father (or the engineer or the leader of a nation, or the post-office sub-clerk) that I am preparing to be. I think I can choose to be that rather than something else. I think so unconsciously, to be sure. But at the

same time I strengthen my postulate with the beliefs of those around me, with the presumptions of my human environment (others are so sure of being free, and that cheerful mood is so contagious!). However far one may remain from any presumption, moral or social, one is partly influenced by them and even, for the best among them (there are good and bad presumptions), one adapts one's life to them. Thus the absurd man realizes that he was not really free. To speak clearly, to the extent to which I hope, to which I worry about a truth that might be individual to me, about a way of being or creating, to the extent to which I arrange my life and prove thereby that I accept its having a meaning, I create for myself barriers between which I confine my life. I do like so many bureaucrats of the mind and heart who only fill me with disgust and whose only vice, I now see clearly, is to take man's freedom seriously.

The absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future. Henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom. I shall use two comparisons here. Mystics, to begin with, find freedom in giving themselves. By losing themselves in their god, by accepting his rules, they become secretly free. In spontaneously accepted slavery they recover a deeper independence. But what does that freedom mean? It may be said, above all, that they *feel* free with regard to themselves, and not so much free as liberated. Likewise, completely turned toward death (taken here as the most obvious absurdity), the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules. It can be seen at this point that the initial themes of existential philosophy keep their entire value. The return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep represent the first steps of absurd freedom. But it is existential *preaching* that is alluded to, and with it that spiritual leap which basically escapes consciousness. In the same way (this is my second comparison) the slaves of antiquity did not belong to themselves. But they knew that freedom which consists in not feeling responsible.[11] Death, too, has patrician hands which, while crushing, also liberate.

Losing oneself in that bottomless certainty, feeling henceforth sufficiently remote from one's own life to increase it and take a broad view of it—this involves the principle of a liberation. Such new independence has a definite time limit, like any freedom of action. It does not write a check on eternity. But it takes the place of the illusions of *freedom,* which all stopped with death. The

divine availability of the condemned man before whom the prison doors open in a certain early dawn, that unbelievable disinterestedness with regard to everything except for the pure flame of life—it is clear that death and the absurd are here the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live. This is a second consequence. The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.

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But what does life mean in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given. Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary. But this is worth examining.

Knowing whether or not one can live *without appeal* is all that interests me. I do not want to get out of my depth. This aspect of life being given me, can I adapt myself to it? Now, faced with this particular concern, belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality. If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living. It is not up to me to wonder if this is vulgar or revolting, elegant or deplorable. Once and for all, value judgments are discarded here in favor of factual judgments. I have merely to draw the conclusions from what I can see and to risk nothing that is hypothetical. Supposing that living in this way were not honorable, then true propriety would command me to be dishonorable.

The most living; in the broadest sense, that rule means nothing. It calls for definition. It seems to begin with the fact that the notion of quantity has not been sufficiently explored. For it can account for a large share of human experience. A man’s rule of conduct

and his scale of values have no meaning except through the quantity and variety of experiences he has been in a position to accumulate. Now, the conditions of modern life impose on the majority of men the same quantity of experiences and consequently the same profound experience. To be sure, there must also be taken into consideration the individual's spontaneous contribution, the "given" element in him. But I cannot judge of that, and let me repeat that my rule here is to get along with the immediate evidence. I see, then, that the individual character of a common code of ethics lies not so much in the ideal importance of its basic principles as in the norm of an experience that it is possible to measure. To stretch a point somewhat, the Greeks had the code of their leisure just as we have the code of our eight-hour day. But already many men among the most tragic cause us to foresee that a longer experience changes this table of values. They make us imagine that adventurer of the everyday who through mere quantity of experiences would break all records (I am purposely using this sports expression) and would thus win his own code of ethics.[12] Yet let's avoid romanticism and just ask ourselves what such an attitude may mean to a man with his mind made up to take up his bet and to observe strictly what he takes to be the rules of the game.

Breaking all the records is first and foremost being faced with the world as often as possible. How can that be done without contradictions and without playing on words? For on the one hand the absurd teaches that all experiences are unimportant, and on the other it urges toward the greatest quantity of experiences. How, then, can one fail to do as so many of those men I was speaking of earlier—choose the form of life that brings us the most possible of that human matter, thereby introducing a scale of values that on the other hand one claims to reject?

But again it is the absurd and its contradictory life that teaches us. For the mistake is thinking that that quantity of experiences depends on the circumstances of our life when it depends solely on us. Here we have to be over-simple. To two men living the same number of years, the world always provides the same sum of experiences. It is up to us to be conscious of them. Being aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum. Where lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless. Let's be even more simple. Let us say that the sole obstacle, the sole deficiency to be made good, is

constituted by premature death. Thus it is that no depth, no emotion, no passion, and no sacrifice could render equal in the eyes of the absurd man (even if he wished it so) a conscious life of forty years and a lucidity spread over sixty years.[13] Madness and death are his irreparables. Man does not choose. The absurd and the extra life it involves *therefore do not defend on man's will,* but on its contrary, which is death.[14] Weighing words carefully, it is altogether a question of luck. One just has to be able to consent to this. There will never be any substitute for twenty years of life and experience.

By what is an odd inconsistency in such an alert race, the Greeks claimed that those who died young were beloved of the gods. And that is true only if you are willing to believe that entering the ridiculous world of the gods is forever losing the purest of joys, which is feeling, and feeling on this earth. The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man. But the word "ideal" rings false in this connection. It is not even his vocation, but merely the third consequence of his reasoning. Having started from an anguished awareness of the inhuman, the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its itinerary to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt.[15]

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Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide. I know, to be sure, the dull resonance that vibrates throughout these days. Yet I have but a word to say: that it is necessary. When Nietzsche writes: "It clearly seems that the chief thing in heaven and on earth is to *obey* at length and in a single direction: in the long run there results something for which it is worth the trouble of living on this earth as, for example, virtue, art, music, the dance, reason, the mind—something that transfigures, something delicate, mad, or divine," he elucidates the rule of a really distinguished code of ethics. But he also points the way of the absurd man. Obeying the flame is both the easiest and the hardest thing to do. However, it is good for man to judge himself occasionally. He is alone in being able to do so.

"Prayer," says Alain, "is when night descends over thought."

“But the mind must meet the night,” reply the mystics and the existentials. Yes, indeed, but not that night that is born under closed eyelids and through the mere will of man—dark, impenetrable night that the mind calls up in order to plunge into it. If it must encounter a night, let it be rather that of despair, which remains lucid—polar night, vigil of the mind, whence will arise perhaps that white and virginal brightness which outlines every object in the light of the intelligence. At that degree, equivalence encounters passionate understanding. Then it is no longer even a question of judging the existential leap. It resumes its place amid the age-old fresco of human attitudes. For the spectator, if he is conscious, that leap is still absurd. In so far as it thinks it solves the paradox, it reinstates it intact. On this score, it is stirring. On this score, everything resumes its place and the absurd world is reborn in all its splendor and diversity.

But it is bad to stop, hard to be satisfied with a single way of seeing, to go without contradiction, perhaps the most subtle of all spiritual forces. The preceding merely defines a way of thinking. But the point is to live.

Let me repeat. None of all this has any real meaning. On the way to that liberty, there is still a progress to be made. The final effort for these related minds, creator or conqueror, is to manage to free themselves also from their undertakings: succeed in granting that the very work, whether it be conquest, love, or creation, may well not be; consummate thus the utter futility of any individual life. Indeed, that gives them more freedom in the realization of that work, just as becoming aware of the absurdity of life authorized them to plunge into it with every excess.

All that remains is a fate whose outcome alone is fatal. Outside of that single fatality of death, everything, joy or happiness, is liberty. A world remains of which man is the sole master. What bound him was the illusion of another world. The outcome of his thought, ceasing to be renunciatory, flowers in images. It frolics—in myths, to be sure, but myths with no other depth than that of human suffering and, like it, inexhaustible. Not the divine fable that amuses and blinds, but the terrestrial face, gesture, and drama in which are summed up a difficult wisdom and an ephemeral passion.

The Myth Of Sisyphus

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

If one believes Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. According to another tradition, however, he was disposed to practice the profession of highwayman. I see no contradiction in this. Opinions differ as to the reasons why he became the futile laborer of the underworld. To begin with, he is accused of a certain levity in regard to the gods. He stole their secrets. AEgina, the daughter of AEsopus, was carried off by Jupiter. The father was shocked by that disappearance and complained to Sisyphus. He, who knew of the abduction, offered to tell about it on condition that AEsopus would give water to the citadel of Corinth. To the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water. He was punished for this in the underworld. Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his deserted, silent empire. He

dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

It is said also that Sisyphus, being near to death, rashly wanted to test his wife's love. He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square. Sisyphus woke up in the underworld. And there, annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings were of no avail. Many years more he lived facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth. A decree of the gods was necessary. Mercury came and seized the impudent man by the collar and, snatching him from his joys, led him forcibly back to the underworld, where his rock was ready for him.

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He *is,* as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them. As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves

the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

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If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much. Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus, CEdipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." Sophocles' CEdipus, like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, thus gives the recipe for the absurd victory. Ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism.

One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. "What! by such narrow ways—?" There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness. "I conclude that all is well," says CEdipus, and that remark is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a

preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is es-sential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.