

I was born in Avignon,

in the city, at number 3, rue La Carreterie, but I was brought up in the country. I was there already by the time I was three and I have remained there without a break until my seventieth year. That is something that carries weight. I can even say that, for me, that is the only thing that carries weight – the country. The need and the love of it have been with me all my life. I still live in it and in it I have two houses, all mine, rooted in the soil, houses with old and good roots. Both of them are built in the rolling hills where tiers of trees grow terrace upon terrace, hardy and dense, olives, cypresses, almonds, and oaks. True trees, trees of my blood. For one has, one must have, the trees of one's blood, of one's own stock. My own trees are the hard, the tough ones, trees that can't be uprooted, either in their soil or in my heart. Heart and soil are one and the same in me, and that is why I have the same blood as my trees. I live by their life, and I suffer with them and in them, from cold, frost, and excessive heat. That is a way of being, a way of loving. I cannot conceive that it is possible to love in any other way and that it may be possible to be anything other than what we love...

I sometimes startle myself with the thought that once long ago I have been a little part of the country and so, now that I am on the point of recalling the most distant memories of my life, is it not only natural that it should be those, to begin with, from the time when the cornfields, the orchards, and the vines delighted my infancy?...

The house looked out onto the fields and the fields onto hawthorn hedges. At the end of the garden was a boundary of low cypresses. The openwork door looked onto the countryside.

Beyond the hawthorn hedges could be seen stands of enormous plane trees, vigorous clumps of poplars, and woodlands of willow trees. Cutting across the greenery of these gentle trees, walls of black cypresses bent beneath the wind. Occasionally, but rarely, a farmhouse roof stretched out amidst the great leaf canopy, only just visible. Further off, up above these rare roof structures of bluish tiles, the Little Alps, delicately indented, marked the horizon.

I could see them from the window of my room, which was on the first floor. This window looked out to the south and onto the fields, but there two fine plane trees, redolent of sulphur, had produced a vigorous foliage. They would have made their way into the room, if, as a precaution, some branches had not been pruned away. You had to push aside the leaves in order to see, beyond the fields, the Little Alps which, in the morning, held back the finest of the light.

In front of the house stood the plane trees, and further off, the old fig tree, the well, a pump, a large stone bench, and the barns. Two small barns, beside the threshing floor, where an enormous roller slept which had not been used for years. For nobody any longer threshed on this floor, where however, in very dry weather, beneath the flaming sun, the scent of the corn still drifted. Against the wall of the house, between the plane trees, there climbed a fine bower of muscat grapes and plum tomatoes. Behind the house, sheltered by the papyrus reed hedges, there was a little vegetable garden where my father, who was hard-working and ingenious, had constructed clay irrigation channels to facilitate the watering... Forced out [of Avignon] by the cholera plague, we went to take refuge with some friends, the Verandos, quite some distance away from the town, in that district where, some weeks later, we were to set up our household gods for a period of some twenty years. We placed them beneath a modest roof, happily situated facing the south, overlooking fields in which every year wheat, oats, barley, and maize produced their harvests, where, behind their hedges of dense cypress, morning and evening there threaded upwards above the roofs sweet-smelling smoke, where henhouses cackled, where goats bleated and donkeys brayed, where sometimes in the distance the neighing of a horse was heard, or a dog barked, or a passing wood pigeon was heard cooing...

...[The land was] beautiful, or at least possessed of a beauty all its own, but one which I only notice today. At that time [in my childhood], more than anything else I was sensitive to its melancholy. It was flat, and still is... And everything that is flat fills me with great sadness.

"Great plain, great for rain," said Aunt Martine.

She was right. For a flat land is never so flat as when it rains, and rain is never so typically rain as it is on flat land. Whoever has not noticed it knows nothing, neither about rain nor about the plain. As long as it be so, I notice it, plain after plain. The Camargue is such a place, but what distances!... Nothing to interrupt them. It is the good fortune of beautiful flat lands that nothing interrupts the flatness in the distance, except the vast, mysterious clouds that are born there, but then it is another world that rises above the plain and piles up so many imaginary lands on the horizon that the plain is soon like the sea and, as far as the eye can penetrate, becomes like a vast spreading dream. You are no longer certain of the land...

But if a land is flat as far as the horizon, limited by the feeblest rising of hummocks and hills, ah! sadly it becomes what it is, banality itself. Unable to bear its presence, one's eye runs straight off to those distant knolls and searches there for what the plain, being bounded by a barrier, can no longer grant to the spirit or to the heart. Even if those faraway heights have nothing in themselves to stir your blood, you cannot help being stirred, for they allow you to foresee a beyond where, as with every beyond, you can, as the fancy takes you, create, gather, scatter, and dismiss all the dreams you have need of, and God knows how we need to live in our dreams!...

So, for me, that bewitching barrier, that I espied from my room on the first floor, had a living existence. Scarcely were its heavy shutters opened, when beyond meadows, copses, ploughed fields, papyrus reed fences, roofs, poplar or black cypress hedges, clear in the morning and shadowy towards the evening, very jagged, at least three leagues far off, the Little Alps tinged the horizon with blue. I have never loved a horizon so much as this low rampart, which sometimes seemed to me to be made of crystal, sometimes even, more lightly, to be composed of a mass of air just a little darker in colour than the sky, of which I had been told that after these hills it would sink again into the sea.

Having no knowledge whatsoever of history, the past of this beautiful land, its tradition of courtly love, its ladies of the manor, its troubadours, and so many other vanished splendours (which I only learned about much later), I peopled that pure horizon, at my whim, according to my most pressing desires and my need for happy lands afar, with scenes of pastoral life and solitary wanderings. I never went there, but I had heard their beautiful names which my parents, or perhaps Aunt Martine, used to speak in my presence in a tone and manner that lent them the extraordinary potency of magical lands. Imagine then what magic spells could be contained by words like Montmajour, Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, Saint-Rémy, les Baux, Fontvielle, Eygalières, and so I would pick them up and quote them, randomly, just as they would suddenly come into my head, where they remain just as full of life as they were when I was a child...