

“The Algerian’s Flowers”

by: Marguerite Duras for the *France-Observateur*, 1957

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It’s Sunday morning, 10:00 a.m., at the crossroads of Jacob and Bonaparte, in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighbourhood, about ten days ago. A young man moves towards this crossroads from the direction of Buci market. He’s twenty years old, he’s very miserably dressed, he’s pushing a cart overflowing with flowers; it’s a young Algerian who sells, illegally, as he lives, flowers. He moves towards the Jacob-Bonaparte crossroads, less surveilled than the market and stops, in anxiety, of course.

He’s right to be anxious. He’s only been there ten minutes – he’s not even had time to sell a single bouquet – when two men in plainclothes move towards him. They come out on Bonaparte Street. They give chase. Nose to the wind, picking up the scent of this beautiful sunny Sunday, promising irregularities, as for other species, the partridge, they go straight towards their prey.

Papers?

He has no papers permitting him to exercise the business of flowers.

Thus, one of the men approaches the cart, slips his closed fist underneath and – ah! How strong he is! – with a single punch overturns its contents. The crossroads floods with the first flowers of (Algerian) spring.

Eisenstein isn’t there, nor any other to spot the image of these flowers on the ground, regarded by the young Algerian man of twenty years, framed on each side by the representatives of French order. The first cars that pass, and this cannot be prohibited, avoid trampling the flowers, go around them instinctively.

No one in the street, except, yes there is, a woman, only one:

– Bravo Messieurs! she cries. You see, if only we did that every time, we’d soon be rid of this scum. Bravo!

But another woman comes from the market, behind the first. She looks at the flowers and at the young criminal who was selling them, and at the jubilatory woman, and the two men. And without one word, she stoops, picks up some of the flowers, moves towards the young Algerian, and pays him. After her, another woman comes, picks up, and pays. After her, four other women come, pick up, and pay. Fifteen women. Still in silence. These men stamp their feet. But what to do? These flowers are for sale and no one can stop anyone from wishing to buy them.

It all took barely ten minutes. There isn’t a single flower on the ground.

After which, these men had the time to take the young Algerian to the police station.

Original translation by Lauren Upadhyay, February 2016.