

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

Rekha Valliappan

Battle of Flowers

'I must have flowers, always, and always.' --Claude Monet

THEY FELL IN A SHOWER OF JELLIED EELS, lacy white and smelling, the water drops of their freshness dabbling against my lips, moisture draining into my damp arms.

Patches of ochre and red and violet rippled my face, bare arms and hair, the wetness in each slipping and sliding from my grasp. He said they made me look like a goldfish having hypothermia. A month earlier he was different. A month later he was gone.

D'excellentes qualite, get it? He has a smile like a parabola, the upturn to the corners of the mouth flexing the muscles of his cheeks it gives me a facelift. When you go to a flower battle you had best be equipped with *d'humeur constante*, he says laying the groundwork, flashing his limited French, flashing his dark eyes the way black pebbles discover the sun, when he talks of holidays or carnivals *de rejouissances*.

Mostly we have settled for Asia, re-trekking our favorite hill stations, Darjeeling twice, Ooty multiple times. Most people we knew went to Disneyland for a vacation. Or simply to be happy. That year we made it to *La Promenade des Anglais* riding the *train a grande vitesse* (TGV) Paris to Marseilles. Call it a spur of the moment fini. Imagine feeling sore, grim and indisposed in the middle of Nice's world famous promenade.

He grumbles that the seats I've picked are too uppity, that the *Anais Anais* I wear is too strong, that the crush is mayhem, that the smell of the fresh salty air of the Mediterranean is too dulled for him to catch a whiff. He scowls darkly, picking the spot we will stand to experience this cascade of flowers. I am too excited at the thought of this flower spectacle, honest to goodness I pretend not to listen and wait on the sidewalk, under the shade of my lovely new hat. The fleeting looks I receive are more than enough to have me acutely conscious of my gaucheness. While my feminine disposition is continuing to grow chatty, his is unevenly so drying up it has reached tipping point.

The occasion is the *Bataille de Fleurs* along the iconic shoreline of Nice where the bluest of sea waters you can ever imagine meets land along the *Cote d'Azur*. It is a beautiful day in March. The sun is shining bright. Crowds of people are lining the route, filling every cafe and bistro. Excitement and energy are at peak for the parade which will typically depict extravagantly dressed kings and allegorical princesses, burlesque characters in French-costumed finery, it would seem they have stepped out of a page in history, including onlookers, visitors, revelers and tourists. I am prepared to see floats appear in a never-ending line with loud music and fanfare. The thrill to expect is not a single person will leave the route without an armload of fragrance, so they say, be they garden fresh carnations or lilies, mimosas or lavender, peonies or tall slips of gladiola blooms.

From the viewpoint of a woman's vanity I must confess the flowers are my focus, nothing but the flowers, I wish I could gather many more bouquets. Emulating the throngs I am dressed to match complete with flaming red straw hat, rows of pink crystals celebrating springtime around my

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

neck, my French countryside floral dress in blush rose, feeling as alive as I look. By contrast he has his dull disabled look, shoulders hunched.

A young Brazilian couple who are staying in Antibes, or one of the smaller towns, Menton, I suspect, I forget which, have struck up friendship. This is their third year. They are fashionably dressed. Their intense dedication to each other is eclipsing. They are bent on regaling me with the origins of the enchanting hundred year old story behind this unique 'Battle.' I am acquainted with some of its playful aspects of a 'real' battle tradition, pelting with flowers. But I am amused by their lively jangle while my thoughts are on him, of our axiomatic underlying '*bataille*.' We throw flowers in prayer or for death, or cremation is the width and breath of how far he will intersect in our group dialogue. He makes his escape. We cannot come together, not today.

He has crossed the street digging deep in his pockets for a packet of gum. He is standing by the cafe. I can barely see him through the crowds. The couple, their friendliness pumped to overflowing, unmindful of the surrounding racket are carrying on uninterrupted, ready to catch the hail of flowers crisscrossing the air in large numbers.

The scene is extraordinary to witness, creatively executed and so invigorating that the torments of the moment jarring my life edge out of tune with the surrounding passion. Looking back I cannot say at that moment whether it is a surfeit of floats and flowers, although who among us will not fall in love with flowers slamming out of the sky in every hue and shade, or the shouts of raucous jubilation, or the excessive perfumery scenting the air, or my own out-of-control wanton exuberance, in particular for one costumed imposing 'Blackbeard' who somehow singles me, somersaults in loopy tumbles to throw me some well-aimed bouquets, which I cleverly catch to shouts of encouragement and applause from the crowds, that makes him grow muzzled, distant, while I am mesmerized beyond control

Paging through my old photo albums I re-discover those old pictures which recaptured one sun-filled dramatic vacation on the French Riviera. I can never forget the flowers, or the history or the jubilation. Or for that matter the hendiatis rule of three *liberte equalite fraternite*. We went there just once, but our flower handprint stays there forever. Each year when bitter joys are memorialized I capture the 'battle' in his memory. The French *bataille that was then* and the silent battle that was ours. I place a row of yellow, blue and red, and sweet-smelling lacey white woodruff, our love for each other tightly wrapped, now a bundle of threaded flowers.

When fall comes and the yard outside is brimming in rust and gold, the colors speak as they always have. Incredulously. To the memory of him and to me. He used to love their crunch. A red leaf stretched to the edges of its leaflet elevations, looping round the earth, once in Himalayas, forward to the Dolomites. Sitting with my photographs, watching the show like blowups of miniature paintings, I want to go down this road.

Briefly. An edelweiss fills me with as much remembrance as a small jasmine. With flowers there never were any borders for us, they grew in abundance. They stretched to the Ursa Major. He knew the poetics in the language of these flaring dabs of color as he would say so spreading, so

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

emblematic, so aesthetic, conveying such a joy and transparency of meaning in so many different ways, that whenever I need a pretext to uncover my shrouded existence it is to the symphony of year round color blotches that I turn, soldiering on. He can never be erased from my memory but I will always have the flowers.

C'est la vie! On se voit la-bas!