

THE GODLY STENCH OF THE QUAI AUX FLEURS

An olfactory exploration by **Adam Biles**

Illustration by **Marcos García Segarra**, 7 years old

On the Quai aux Fleurs, where the river wall cuts away, two sets of steps drop towards the Seine and upon reaching it continue under. The steps form a small harbour into which the water fans and bulges, as though commanded by some power beneath the surface, before heaving itself back into the river's westward flow. Most visitors don't make it as far as the water, and the bottom steps have become an oasis for the lone wolf. As a rule, the sitter here is left undisturbed, the noise of the city a distant muffle above. I come for this tranquillity. I also come for the smell.

On a day of high tides and low winds, when the sky is an even marble grey and the water bottle-green, waiting here can at first feel desolate, as if waiting by the Styx for Charon to spirit you across. At length, however, the smell arrives, or rather you arrive to the smell, for it was there all along waiting for you. It is not a sweet smell, but neither is it repellent. To say so is like rejecting the colours of the spectrum because you can't stand the glare of white light. It's just an unruly scent of many strands, not all of which can be unravelled and not one of which can be said to hold the key to the others. There are acrid strands – oil and effluent, a reminder that this is a working river – but also hints of the organic, of the flora and dogged fauna that call the river home and, still more subtle, of the Burgundy soil from which the water springs. It's a smell that clears the nostrils and sharpens the nose, just like certain tastes sharpen the palette.

The smell changes with time. One day you may be struck by its alcoholic, almost medicinal tang, on another by something like damp leather. On yet another you might swear that you can actually smell the fish that drift listlessly just below the surface, the shape of fat bullets.

Why though, with all the perfumeries and 'boulangeries' in town awash with artfully seductive odours, would anyone seek this one out? For the pleasure? No, not quite. One morning several miles west, on the Allée des Cygnes, it was put to me like this: "That place smells like God would smell after a night in the dives of Pigalle." No matter that the breath of this unknown chatterer was spiced with hard liquor, for how right he was. Dragged down and dirty, of course, but holy too – for

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up through the industrial grime rises the irrepressible scent of Mother Earth, obstinately living!

I discovered the Quai aux Fleurs several years ago, shortly after arriving in Paris, and returned often. Once, descending the steps, I caught sight of something in the water. A battered armchair turning around and about in the current and, perched on its spinning apex, an angry, somewhat dizzy, but determined-looking gull. Watching it spiral away, I smiled. Like a peppercorn floating in a bowl of soup, here was a concentration of the difficult mix of flavours that made up the river: the natural, the man-made, the breathtakingly elegant and the dizzyingly absurd. The intangible, contradictory aroma of an intangible, contradictory city. For the smell of this river, more than any other, is for me the smell of Paris. The one smell that is truly of the city. The smell of nowhere else but here.

ADAM BILES is Paris correspondent for Ling. A collection of fiction and poetry featuring his work, *The Place In Which We Find Ourselves*, was published last year. It is available in Europe from Shakespeare & Company, Paris, and online at www.findourselves.com

