

JEAN GENET

Four Hours in Shatila
Translated from French
by Edmund White

From one wall of the street to the other, bent or arched, with their feet pushing against one wall and their heads pressing against the other, the black and bloated corpses that I had to step over were all Palestinian and Lebanese. For me, as for what remained of the population, walking through Shatila and Sabra resembled a game of hopscotch. Sometimes a dead child blocked the streets: they were so small, so narrow and the dead so numerous. The smell is probably familiar to some old people; it didn't bother me. But there were so many flies. If I lifted the handkerchief or the Arab newspaper placed over a head, I disturbed them. Infuriated by my action, they swarmed onto the back of my hand and tried to feed there. The first corpse I saw was that of a man fifty or sixty years old. He would have had a shock of white hair if a wound (an axe blow, it seemed to me) hadn't split his skull. (...)

In a narrow street, in the shadow of the wall, I thought I saw a Black boxer sitting on the ground, surprised to have been knocked out. No one had had the heart to close his eyelids, his bulging eyes as white as porcelain were looking at me. He seemed crestfallen, with his arm raised, leaning against this angle of the wall. He was a Palestinian who had been dead two or three days. If I mistook him at first for a Black boxer it was because his head was enormous, swollen and black, like all the heads on all the bodies, whether in the sun or in the shadow of the houses. I walked near his feet. I picked up an upper dental plate in the dust and set it on what remained of the window ledge. The palm of his hand opened toward the sky, his open mouth, the opening in his pants where the belt was missing: all hives where the flies were feeding.

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