

## They Were Coming for Him

**Berta Vias-Mahou**

**Cecilia Ross, Translator**

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On January 4, 1960, Nobel Laureate, existentialist thinker, and dedicated pacifist Albert Camus died in a tragic, and highly suspicious, car accident. Camus was just forty-six years old.

Berta Vias Mahou's sensitive and probing novel combines fact, fiction, and excerpts from Camus's own writings to illuminate the French-Algerian writer's life and death through the story of his alter ego, Jacques.

Growing up amidst the violence in Algiers, young Jacques is haunted by recurring nightmares of his own death by execution. Even awake, he imagines the feel of the forty-five pound blade dropping to sever skin, nerves, bones and arteries.

As a writer, Jacques's outspoken stance for peace and justice has put him at odds with the powers that be. With Stalin and Franco in control and Algeria fighting for independence from France, the simplest of words and phrases "cost their weight in freedom and blood," and even fictional works could end up spelling death. Spies could be anywhere, and Jacques is aware that his executioners could come for him at any time. Death threats increased after his last visit to Algiers, where his proposals for reconciliation made him enemies on all sides.

This thoughtful, if somewhat slow-moving, story holds messages for us today, among them that the "practice of goading people on in their antagonism of one another" is both abhorrent and dangerous and that what will remain of most of our precious lives are impalpable memories, "the weightless ash of a butterfly wing consumed in a forest fire."

KRISTINE MORRIS (Summer 2016)

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