

Our Local Dead

Javier Marías

IT SEEMS somehow very timely, so close to All Souls' Day, the chance discovery of an ossuary in Calle de Arapiles in Madrid, near to where I still live—an ossuary that originally contained no fewer than three hundred corpses. Apparently, these mortal remains (for that is all they are, hap-hazard remains, stray bones) came from the Cementerio General del Norte, which until the early part of the twentieth century occupied a rectangular plot in that part of the city. Although it was closed in 1884, the cemetery wasn't entirely abandoned until forty years later, and it was for a while the resting place of the writer Mariano José de Larra, who committed suicide in 1837, when he famously stood in front of a mirror and shot himself in the head, the victim of a lover's indifference.

I don't know why these remains have now been so patiently removed from where they lay. They've been thrown into containers made of a material they would never have known, namely, plastic, and taken to a storage place in another cemetery, La Almudena. We will probably never know what becomes of them now; we will lose all

trace, and the only other object found, the soles of a child's shoes, will have bade a definitive farewell to whoever wore them. In recent days, the curious inhabitants of the Chamberí district have been peering into the trenches with a mixture of curiosity, fear, and relief ("At least it's not us") to watch the exhumation of what you couldn't even really call corpses, these skeletons, these random tibias and scapulas. However, while the undertaker's workers were digging ever deeper, one old lady was weeping at the thought of her great-grandparents. Perhaps she knew they had been buried in the old Cementerio General del Norte, or perhaps her tears were more generous and more general, more speculative, shed for all those we usually call "our ancestors."

I don't know why they've moved these remains; I doubt they would have proved much of an obstacle to the planned car park. Every building in the world is built on its dead, who, once buried, can no longer scandalize or bother anyone, and who perhaps left this world with the vague idea that their bodies would rest in some known and reasonably respected place. The fact that an early-twentieth-century city

council gave permission to tarmac over and build on them without first removing them might seem rather less than honorable. I'm not so sure, since the foundations of almost every building on earth are doubtless mingled with someone's mortal remains. It seems to me far less considerate to cart them off somewhere now, when no living person can remember, let alone recognize them—to exhume and dig them up and expose them to the air when they lack even the appearance of being human, when the only person mourning them as they emerge from those silent depths is an old lady who might well be weeping for herself and her own future death.

This discovery and this intrusion of the living into the peace and quiet of the dead reminded me of the English doctor and writer Sir Thomas Browne, some of whose works I translated years ago, and who, inspired by the discovery of a Roman urn burial in Norfolk in the seventeenth century, wrote these words: "But who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried? Who hath the Oracle of his ashes, or whether they are to be scattered?... these are sad and sepulchral Pitchers, which have no joyful voices; silently expressing old mortality, the ruins of forgotten times... But seeing they arose as they lay, almost in silence among us, at least in short account suddenly passed over; we were very unwilling they should die again, and be buried twice among us."□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Obituary

The only page that's always all about life,
Latin for "gone down." *Pues*, cooler than "grief."

The other pages of News are all about death.
Nu, what went down? What's up? Or underneath?

In Spanish and Yiddish, a word the sound of waiting
For what may be worth saying, which may be nothing.

"*Nu*, so what's new?" the ironic *bubbe* says.
Like Cardenal who writes in Somoza's voice:

I know you people will tear my statue down:
It's not memorial. It's there to give you pain.

Pues, the obits: All described and ranked.
Nu, homo sapiens, by our own works extinct.

All: *Populi*, tyrants, jerks, protectors. Children:
Weep for their *philo-sophia*: to know, see, listen.

Our deathless computers will browse these idle files—
Pues, our records. *Nu*, more just than our wills.

—Robert Pinsky

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