



REFLECTIONS

The Distant Dead (1994)

Javier Marías

FEELING ADMIRATION for someone is a privilege that becomes a calamity when the person we admire dies. As if it were not enough to have those closest to us die—a list that grows longer with the passing years—there’s the additional sadness of losing people we’ve never seen, with whom we’ve never talked or shared a joke, and whom we cannot, therefore, miss. And yet when we learn that such people have ceased to exist, or have gone over to the other side, we feel somehow more alone, bereft. As time passes and more names are added to that list, there are moments when we feel very slightly envious of those who are not here and are perhaps together. And when I say “together” I don’t mean in some kind of afterlife, because I’m not a believer; I mean together in the past, together in their “were” and scornful of our “are.” Having felt somehow accompanied by their activities and by their very existence, we inevitably experience their death as something that has happened to us, as an almost personal drama. It’s not the same as when a friend dies, because those we merely admired from afar were never part of our daily life; it’s more like the death of someone we could always count on in absentia and from whom we could occasionally expect to receive pleasant news in the form of movies or recordings or books. I don’t, therefore, find the large crowds who gather on the anniversary of Elvis Presley’s death entirely incomprehensible—nor their apparent belief that he isn’t actually dead, but is hidden away somewhere, and will return one day singing new songs in his now aged voice.

My idols are not only literary ones, although quite a number of those have already died, and as proof that their deaths really did feel personal, as if they had actually happened to me, I can remember the precise moment when I learned of their deaths, almost

always from reading about it in a newspaper (because no one bothers to inform the idol’s unknown admirers). On a trip to Seville in 1977, while I was having breakfast in a bar in Calle Sierpe with a friend, we both felt genuinely sad on reading in the morning paper that Vladimir Nabokov had died. He was of a reasonable age, seventy-eight, but my first thought was that his death had confirmed his own

prediction—one that he himself did not entirely believe—namely, that he would never return to the city of his birth, St. Petersburg, where his books were still banned, and that his death would also mean the demise of all his personal memories, some of which, fortunately, he had recorded in his extraordinary memoir, *Speak, Memory*. I remember, years later, having supper in Madrid with friends and talking to them about a novel by the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters*, which I happened to be reading in the French translation. When I returned home that night, I read a few more pages, and enjoyed them so much that I decided to reserve the remaining twenty pages for the next day—the kind of resolution that will be familiar to all good readers, reluctant for that particular pleasure to end. When I got up the next morning, I read in the newspaper that Bernhard had just died at a relatively young age, after a life spent battling illnesses he had contracted as a child. He was not yet sixty, and after his death it took me a long time to finish the book. The publication in Spain of *Gargoyles* (*Verstörung*, translated as *Trastorno* in Spanish) came about largely because I had recommended it to the publisher for whom I was acting as a reader at the time, and this made me feel that I was, in a way, a participant in his new works. I haven’t yet read the novel published since his death, *Extinction*, because I still want to have something by Bernhard to read when I feel the need, just as we might choose not to open a letter from a loved one received after his death, knowing that it will be the last we ever receive from him and that it is now perhaps unmerited.

The Canadian pianist Glenn Gould died when he was only fifty, by which

time I had spent about ten years seeking out and listening to all his records. He had stopped giving concerts years before, believing that he could achieve greater perfection in the recording studio, and because his vanity did not require the stimulus of a live audience’s applause. There was therefore not the slightest chance that I would ever see or hear him play live, and yet the news of his death somehow deprived me of a great hope; and as we all know, the most chimerical of hopes, precisely because they are chimerical, are always those we hold most dear. Then Joseph L. Mankiewicz died, the director of, among other marvels, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, my favorite movie (although he himself considered it to be the work of a beginner). And, not long ago now, Audrey Hepburn died: I was, in my devotion to her, no different from many other adolescents of that era. A world without these people seems to us momentarily impossible, or, rather, the world seems less ours.

The death of Juan Benet, nearly two years ago now, meant the death of both a friend and an idol, something I would not wish on anyone. I know when I open the newspaper that there’ll be no new article by him, that I’ll find no new novel by him when I go into a bookshop. I can, of course, return to his old novels, as I can to the music of Glenn Gould, or to the face of Audrey Hepburn in the place where I’ve always seen it, on a screen. When a friend dies, though, the city is forever changed, diminished, because I know I can’t now go and visit him in his apartment. He wouldn’t be the one to open the door to me, a door that remains forever closed. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

In a Former Coal Mine in Silesia

In a former coal mine in Silesia, a thousand feet inside the earth,
a tongue kept speaking.

In the Arctic, by the triangular door to the Svalbard seed vault,
a tongue, almost fearless, almost not clumsy, spoke.
Spoke verbs, conjunctions, adjectives, adverbs, nouns.

In a small town in the Australian outback,
in the city of Nanjing, near a gate still recalling unthinkable closures,
by a lake in Montana, a tongue, almost steady,
almost not stumbling, spoke facts, hypotheses, memories, riddles, stories.

Lungs accept their oxygen without trembling.
Feet stand inside their foot shapes, inside shoes someone has sewn.

We close the eyes of the dead so they will not see their not-seeing.
Light falls on the retinas’ stubbornness, on pupils refusing to turn toward or away.

Fireflies, furnaces, quicksilvers fill them, cities & forests glinting though already finished.

And the tongues, the faithless tongues, continue speaking,
as lovers will, because they still love, long past the hour there is nothing left to say.

—Jane Hirshfield