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Those Who Are Still Here

Author(s): Javier Marías and Margaret Jull Costa

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Those Who Are Still Here

Javier Marías

I RECENTLY HAD a truly Proustian experience, not the kind that simply makes you remember or recall something, but one that transports you, quite implausibly, to another time and, above all—and even more strangely—to another age, in my case to the remote age of four or five years old. It all started with some music: I came across the original soundtrack to *Lili*, one of the first movies I ever saw; in fact, even though it wasn't the *very* first movie I saw (I believe the first was George Sidney's *The Three Musketeers*, with Gene Kelly in the role of D'Artagnan and Lana Turner as Milady), I still think of it that way, possibly because I saw it several times when I was a small child and because it simultaneously provoked in me feelings of delight and feelings of sadness and melancholy. I put the CD on when I got home, and suddenly there I was, four or five years old again, and, despite having seen *Lili* many times, I was carried back to one particular occasion, to the María Cristina movie theater in the Chamberí district—near Calle Covarrubias, the street where I lived and was born—accompanied by my mother and my brothers. The María Cristina movie theater didn't survive, in contrast to others in the area, like the Colón in Calle Génova or maybe the Luchana, which perhaps even now exists, and to

which I could, therefore, have returned when I was much older; however, the María Cristina—like the Príncipe Alfonso, also in Calle Génova—closed its doors when I was still a child, and so I didn't have that many opportunities to “shut myself away” in those particular auditoria, for that was what you did when you went to a movie theater, you shut yourself away from reality. Anyway, hearing the soundtrack again made me think that the sadness it provoked both then and now is a characteristic I doubtless share with many of my fellow human beings—or perhaps not so many of them now—and is not in the least original. Different things will provoke that same sadness in different people, but I think I first became aware of it when I saw *Lili*.

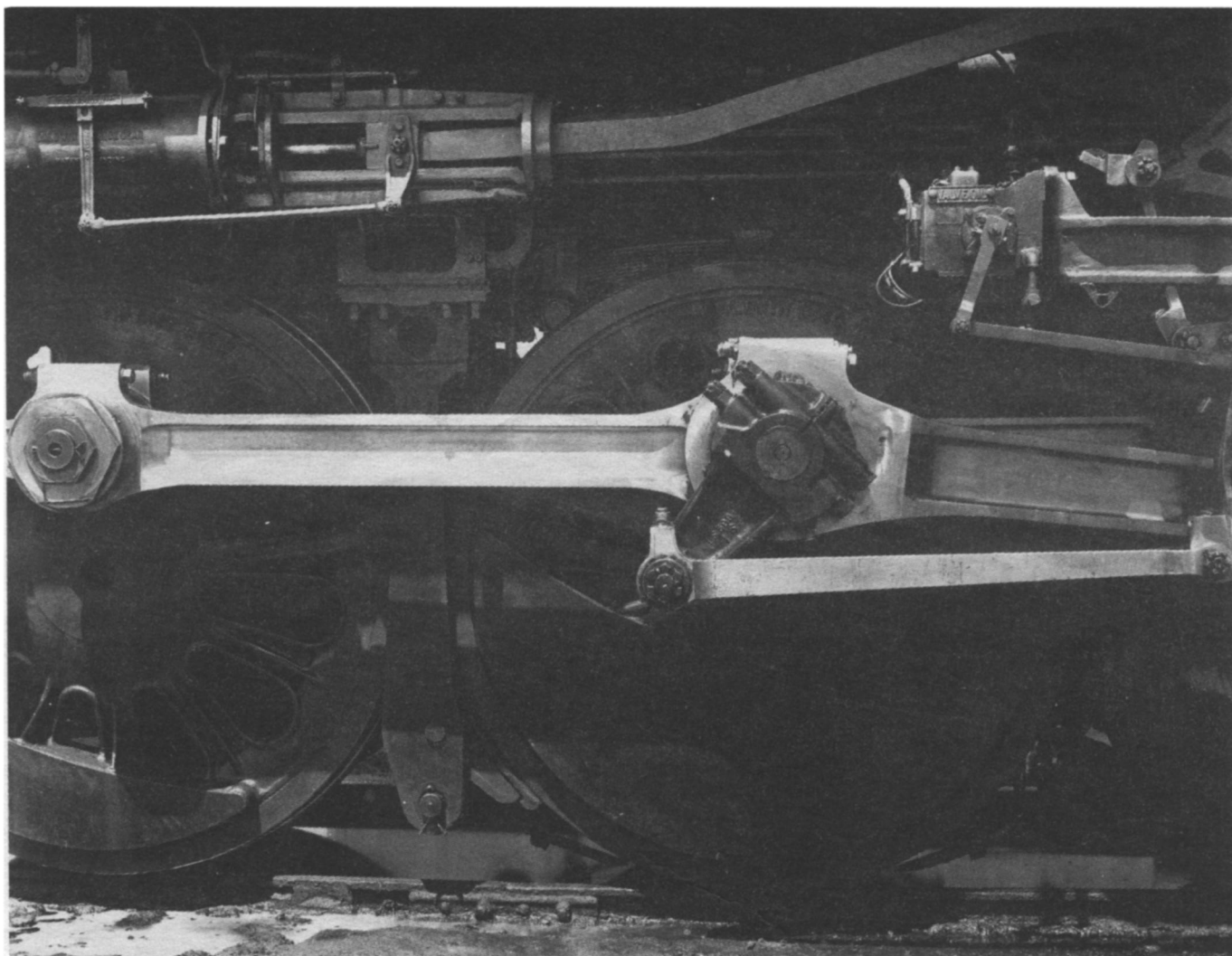
I borrowed the video from my brother Miguel, and watched the whole movie again all these years later. *Lili* was made in 1952, and its music—its theme song—was very famous in its day, so much so that almost anyone born in that decade would be sure to recognize it and be able to sing along. It was written by Bronislau Kaper, a great composer, European and classically trained, as were most of the composers who worked in Hollywood at the time. The director was Charles Walters, who made some fine musicals, and the actors were Leslie Caron and Mel

Ferrer, with the outrageous Zsa Zsa Gabor in a supporting role. The movie has lasted well and still has genuine charm, and even though it was made for children—with a major part being played by four puppets to which the ventriloquist Mel Ferrer gave voices—it's nevertheless tinged with a certain melancholy, as are all movies about the circus or about fairgrounds. But my childhood feeling of sadness arose from a scene towards the end of the movie when Lili decides to leave her job at the puppet show. She sets off alone with her suitcase along a vaguely dream-like road, and suddenly—it's a figment of her imagination, but children can't really distinguish between the imagined and the real—the four puppets she had so reluctantly left behind suddenly appear at her side, except that now they're the same size as her. The music at this point is bright and cheerful, and the five of them set off together, so that the child viewer thinks: “Oh, good, they're all there and can keep each other company wherever they go.” Then, when Lili dances with one of the puppets, it turns into Mel Ferrer and vanishes into the mist shrouding the road. After a few seconds of bewilderment and sorrow, the four remaining characters continue on, less blithely now, until Lili dances with another of the puppets, and the metamorphosis and disappearance are repeated. “They're getting fewer and fewer,” thinks the child with growing anxiety, until the same thing happens to all of the puppets, one after the other. Reynard the Fox was my favorite, a suave fellow who was also a liar and a thief.

“That,” I thought a few days ago, “must be where my dislike of disap-

pearances comes from.” I never want anyone to disappear or go missing, not even those who have hurt me or who are poisoning our country. I've often been amazed at my own reaction on hearing of the death of someone for whom I felt not the slightest liking or admiration, even someone who has done his best to make my life impossible, for I've felt unexpectedly sad, as if my reaction were: “Yes, all right, maybe he was a real pest, but at least he belonged to *before*. He's been around for as long as I can remember, certainly long enough to become part of the landscape; I could depend on him; he was one of the cast, and it's just dreadful not to have him around any more.” It's a feeling we're all familiar with to some extent: nothing is more dismaying than to discover that something—however unimportant—has changed or disappeared from a city we haven't visited for a while or from the district where we spent our childhood, and our sentiments then are along the lines of an outraged “How dare they!” because we experience any such changes as an attack on our own orderly world and on our own personal memory of the place: a stationery shop turned bank, a movie theater transformed into a hamburger joint, a lovely building replaced by an architectural eyesore... Not to mention people: you gradually come to realize that life consists in large part of watching those around you disappear, of feeling momentarily bewildered and sad, and then, like Lili and her fast-diminishing band of puppet companions, resuming your journey along the dream-like road with the few blessed beings who remain, and who are still here. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)



Santa Fe, 1941