A MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

By Wyatt Mason

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Vladimir Nabokov, upbraiding a poet friend for writing a newspaper column, declared, "I am writing my novel. I do not read the papers." Though it wouldn't have been out of character for Nabokov to tax the truth for the sake of a memorable line, it is true that American literary novelists, whether they read the papers or not, typically do not write for them, except in the book-review pages. An op-ed by Michael Chabon may pop up now and again, but it is hard to imagine Philip Roth or even Norman Mailer supplying a weekly column on politics or current affairs.

In Madrid, however, the Spanish novelist Javier Marías does just that. Every week for more than a decade, he has addressed a readership of millions, on politics or art or whatever else might have caught his eye. Although such a prominent byline may help explain the success of his fiction in Spain, it doesn't account for the five million books of his that are in print in some forty countries around the world. To an unusual degree, Marías manages to inhabit not only the popular but also the literary sphere, counting J. M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, and the late W. G. Sebald among his admirers. Although Marías's following in the United States is still small—his newly published novel, "Your Face Tomorrow: Volume I, Fever and Spear" (New Directions; translated by Margaret Jull Costa; $24.95), is only the seventh of his twenty-eight books to have appeared in translation here—his name is regularly mentioned during the annual run-up to the announcement of the

Nobel Prize in Literature. So it's not surprising that his prose demonstrates an unusual blend of sophistication and accessibility. The first page of his novel "Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me" (1994), for example, features this excursus on the misfortune, and humiliation, of sudden death:

*{: .break one} * Seafood poisoning, a cigarette lit as the person is drifting off to sleep and that sets fire to the sheets or, worse, to a woollen blanket; a slip in the shower—the back of the head—the bathroom door locked; a lightning bolt that splits in two a tree planted in a broad avenue, a tree which, as it falls, crushes or slices off the head of a passer-by, possibly a foreigner; dying in your socks, or at the barber's, still wearing a voluminous smock, or in a whorehouse or at the dentist's; or eating fish and getting a bone stuck in your throat, choking to death like a child whose mother isn't there to save him by sticking a finger down his throat; or dying in the middle of shaving, with one cheek still covered in foam, half-shaven for all eternity, unless someone notices and finishes the job off out of aesthetic pity; not to mention life's most ignoble, hidden moments that people seldom mention once they are out of adolescence, simply because they no longer have an excuse to do so, although, of course, there are always those who insist on making jokes about them, never very funny jokes. **

Into the two hundred and one words of this sentence, resourcefully translated by Margaret Jull Costa, Marías crams many tiny triumphs of imagination and elaboration: a slip in the shower enhanced by a locked door that protects no one; decapitation made oddly worse for happening on vacation; an incongruous postmortem shave made comically touching by the phrase "aesthetic pity"—*piedad estética*. Just as Marías's prose teems with seductions, so, too, do the stories themselves. Take the opening of his global best-seller (more than a million copies sold to German readers alone) "A Heart So White" (1992):

*{: .break one} * I did not want to know but I have since come to know that one of the girls, when she wasn't a girl any more and hadn't long been back from her honeymoon, went into the bathroom, stood in front of the mirror, unbuttoned her

*blouse, took off her bra and aimed her own father's gun at her heart, her father at the time was in the living room with other members of the family and three guests. When they heard the shot, some five minutes after the girl had left the table, her father didn't get up at once, but stayed there for a few seconds, paralyzed, his mouth still full of food, not daring to chew or swallow, far less to spit the food out on to his plate; and when he finally did get up and run to the bathroom, those who followed him noticed that when he discovered the blood-splattered body of his daughter and clutched his head in his hands, he kept passing the mouthful of meat from one cheek to the other, still not knowing what to do with it. ***

These two twisting sentences, full of qualifications and deferrals that recall the patient syntax of Henry James, pose a narrative question that the reader feels compelled to unravel: what made the girl kill herself so soon after her honeymoon?

Such plotty provocation—an act of violence disclosed up front whose true significance will not be revealed until the book's end—is a hallmark of Marías's storytelling. In the opening pages of "The Man of Feeling," the narrator, an opera singer, recalls a train journey on which he seduced a married woman while her husband was in the same compartment (the reader waits to see how he did it, and what hell he paid for having done it). In "Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me," a ghostwriter tells of an affair he almost has with a married woman—almost, because the woman dies in his arms before she has a chance to be unfaithful to her husband. How, we wonder, will the narrator handle this unspeakable situation, particularly given that the woman's young son is asleep down the hall?

Even in novels that do not begin with the explosion of a narrative bomb, Marías usually makes sure that we can hear one ticking. In the opening lines of "All Souls" (1989), he tells us:

***{: .break one} ** Of the three, two have died since I left Oxford and the superstitious thought occurs to me that they were perhaps just waiting for me to*

arrive and live out my time there in order to give me the chance to know them and, now, to speak about them. In other words—and this is equally superstitious—I may be under obligation to speak about them. **

We are left to wonder who "the three" are, what befell them, and why the narrator feels an obligation to speak. By the end of the story, these questions have been answered, but the answers prove paradoxical, in a way that is typical of Marías's work. His narrators take an active role in gathering the truths behind appearances: like spies, they trail people, on foot, through cities in America, England, and Spain; they eavesdrop, behind doors, on balconies, and in toilets for the handicapped; like detectives, they extract confessions during long conversations, and deliver the news they have collected. Their reports seem comprehensive but reveal a concatenation of unexpected outcomes—infidelities out of which true loves grow, murders that bring about births.

And yet, behind the garrulous presentation of these existential paradoxes, a silence lingers. After such lavish disclosures, why is it that the narrators reveal almost nothing about themselves? Their names, their lives, their feelings, their identities: all remain concealed or disguised. Usually in first-person narrations, confessions lead the reader to an understanding of how the storyteller was changed by events. Think of Nick in "The Great Gatsby," of Augie in his adventures, or Holden and Humbert in theirs—to say any of these names is to conjure an individual whose essence is laid bare by what he relates. In a Marías novel, if we learn the narrator's name at all, to mention it would only conjure a ghost—it is an alias for someone who remains forever in hiding. This is an effect that Marías has deliberately cultivated: he wants the reader actively to wonder who is telling the stories, perhaps even to conclude that there is really a single narrator who unites the novels. Not so much a distinct individual as a distinctive voice, this narrator speaks to us as if from the lip of a stage, in darkness. The lights never come on. His face is never revealed.

Born in Madrid in 1951, Marías may have good reason to favor protagonists who sidestep the act of self-disclosure. Growing up under the dictatorship of Franco, he assimilated an atmosphere in which writers were presented with strong disincentives to openness. Marías was the son of anti-Francoist intellectuals, and his family endured dictatorial mischief more believably conceived in Groucho's kingdom of Freedonia than in the factual realm of Franco. As Marías told one interviewer:

***{: .break one} ** [My mother] published an anthology titled "España como preocupación" ("Spain as a Preoccupation"), with the subtitle "Literary Anthology." Her name was Dolores Franco—her surname, which is rather common, being the same as the dictator's. Dolores, or Lolita, in Spanish means literally pain, or pains. The censorship argued that "Spain as a Preoccupation," plus Dolores Franco, meaning "pains Franco," wouldn't be accepted. ***

The treatment of Marías's father, on the other hand, lacked any kind of comic dimension. Julián Marías Aguilera, a disciple of the philosopher Ortega y Gasset, was denounced by a former friend, who accused him, falsely, of writing for *Pravda* and of consorting with Communist leaders. At the time, such a charge, even if baseless, was often a death sentence. Aguilera eluded that fate, but he was jailed and, after being released, was banned both from teaching at a university and from writing for newspapers. With limited options and a growing family, he looked abroad and obtained a succession of temporary teaching posts in Puerto Rico and the United States. Less than a month after the birth of Javier, the third of four children, a job became available at Wellesley, and the family moved to Massachusetts. There they lived with the poet Jorge Guillén, himself a Spanish exile, who had a soft spot for visiting intellectuals—among them Vladimir Nabokov, who had lived next door a few years earlier.

This peripatetic period during Javier's early childhood left an indelible mark on him—his parents referred to him as "the American baby." Although most of his life has been spent in Spain (despite teaching stints in America and

Oxford), this formative, forced exposure to English put him on the road to a career that runs parallel to his novelistic existence, as a highly regarded literary translator. Over the years, Marías has translated a vast range of American and English writing, including poetry by John Ashbery, W. H. Auden, Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Frank O'Hara, and Wallace Stevens; and fiction by Anthony Burgess, Raymond Carver, Thomas Hardy, J. D. Salinger, Robert Louis Stevenson, and John Updike. He has also done major translations of classics such as Sir Thomas Browne's "Religio Medici" and Laurence Sterne's "Tristram Shandy."

This work has had an impact on Marías as a writer. On the most basic level, Marías has made all his narrators in some sense translators; whether they happen to teach translation theory or work as interpreters, ghostwriters, or opera singers, each is giving voice to other people's stories. These are professions that fit well with the narrators' tendency never to reveal their identities entirely. Marías's translation work is also reflected in his method, as he once acknowledged in an interview:

***{: .break one} ** If you rewrite high literature in an acceptable way you've done a lot. Your instrument is more resilient than it was. You can say that you're capable of renouncing your own style, adopting someone else's, yet the wording is always yours. The common idea is that the translator is a slave to the original text. But that's not true at all in the sense that there is not one sentence in any language that allows just one translation. You always have to choose. ***

This habit of choosing is central to the kind of writer Marías has become, and explains much of what is unique about his work: he has made indecision—the space between two alternatives—the center of his stories. And this indecision is conveyed in the equivocations and qualifications of the narrative voice.

Although there is ample precedent for the deliberative "I" in literature, it has tended to be the province of nonfiction. Montaigne, who introduced his

essays by alerting the reader that "I am myself the matter of my book," is remembered for his willingness ("*Que sais-je?*") to explore every issue from multiple sides. Like Montaigne, Marías's narrators are unembarrassed to reveal their uncertainties; they choose, but endlessly question their choices, and often contradict themselves entirely. These conspicuous reversals, and a related ambivalence about the benefits of storytelling, are central to Marías's work:

***{: .break one} ** In my books there is not only the action, the characters, the story and so forth; there is reflection as well, and often the action stops. The narrator then makes a series of considerations and meditations. There is a tradition within the novel form, almost forgotten now, which embodies what I call literary thinking or literary thought. It's a way of thinking which takes place only in literature—the things you never think of or hit upon unless you are writing fiction. Unlike philosophical thinking, which demands an argument without logical flaws and contradictions, literary thinking allows you to contradict yourself. ***

"Your Face Tomorrow: Volume I, Fever and Spear," is Marías's most extravagant showcase for "literary thinking" so far. It also serves as a compelling introduction to his writing, and is the start of what promises to be a multivolume work. A second volume, "Baile y Sueño—Dance and Dream"—is already available in Spain, and Marías is now writing Volume III. While he has claimed that this will mark the work's end, it is worth keeping in mind that he made the same claim for Volume II when Volume I appeared. Proust announced, in 1912, that he had finished his multivolume novel, but he continued adding to it for another decade, and died before the final revisions had been completed. Even if Marías's current project does not reach these extremes, the portion of it that has already appeared intensifies a growing suspicion that his novels are all, in a sense, puzzle pieces of a larger whole.

"Fever and Spear" begins with sly, guarded reflections reminiscent of the

opening of "All Souls," a novel that, like this one, is set largely in Oxford:

***{: .break one} ** One should never tell anyone anything or give information or pass on stories or make people remember beings who have never existed or trodden the earth or traversed the world, or who, having done so, are now almost safe in uncertain, one-eyed oblivion. Telling is almost always done as a gift, even when the story contains and injects some poison, it is also a bond, a granting of trust, and rare is the trust or confidence that is not sooner or later betrayed. ***

Immediately, we are led to wonder what betrayal the narrator will reveal. His reluctance to "tell anyone anything" acquires further menace when we learn that he has worked for the British Secret Service as an interpreter, a job that involved more than just translation:

***{: .break one} ** It would be best just to say translator or interpreter of people: of their behaviour and reactions, of their inclinations and characters and powers of endurance; of their malleability and their submissiveness, of their faint or firm wills, their inconstancies, their limits, their innocence, their lack of scruples and their resistance; their possible degrees of loyalty or baseness and their calculable prices and their poisons and their temptations. ***

By taking in what "behaviour and reactions" silently betray about people, the narrator is able to report on them to his bosses.

The narrator—who, it gradually appears, is the narrator of "All Souls" reprised—comes from Madrid, and is named Jacques Deza, although, characteristically, he answers to many cognates of his first name: Jaime, Santiago, Diego, and Yago ("all forms of the same name"), Jacobo ("the most pretentious form"), Iago ("the classical form"), and even Jack ("a phonetic approximation"). Deza narrates his account at some unspecified time in the future, and explains how, in early middle age, he came to espionage. It was at a time of personal difficulty, during "my separation from my wife, Luisa, when I came back to England so as not to be near her while she was slowly distancing herself from me." Living alone in London and working for the

BBC, Deza accepts an invitation to a party in Oxford hosted by an old friend, Professor Peter Wheeler, "an eminent and now retired Hispanist and Lusitanist," even though he suspects that Wheeler's motives go beyond filling him with wine and cheese: "I had already accepted the invitation with pleasure and made a note of the date and the hour, and then he added with feigned hesitancy (but without concealing the fact that it was feigned): 'Anyway, that fellow Bertram Tupra will be there.' " Deza wonders who Tupra is and why Wheeler wants them to meet.

At Wheeler's party, the beginnings of an answer emerge. Initially, Deza is surprised by Tupra's apparent plainness, thinking that he looks "like a well-traveled diplomat . . . or else a high-ranking civil servant." And yet, as he observes him more carefully, Deza discovers more:

***{: .break one} ** His eyes were blue or grey depending on the light and he had long eyelashes, dense enough to be the envy of any woman and to be considered highly suspect by any man. His pale eyes had a mocking quality, even if this was not his intention—and his eyes were, therefore, expressive even when no expression was required—they were also rather warm or should I say appreciative, eyes that are never indifferent to what is there before them and which make anyone upon whom they fall feel worthy of curiosity, eyes whose very liveliness gave the immediate impression that they were going to get to the bottom of whatever being or object or landscape or scene they alighted upon. ***

A penetrating gaze, we find, is something that Wheeler has noticed in Deza, too. Wheeler—a former spy now involved in recruitment—believes that this makes Deza a good candidate for the Secret Service, in which, it turns out, Tupra is a senior figure.

After the other guests have left the party, Wheeler starts to question Deza about them. "What did you think of Beryl?" he asks about Tupra's companion. Deza replies, "Rather too many teeth and too big a jaw, but she's still rather pretty. Her smell is the most attractive thing about her, her best

feature: an unusual, pleasant, very sexual smell." Wheeler stares at Deza with "a mixture of reproof and mockery":

*{: .break one} * "That isn't what I meant at all. I would never have dared even to ask myself if you had or hadn't found Beryl's animal humours stimulating, you'll have to forgive my lack of curiosity about your proclivities in that area. I meant regarding Tupra, what impression did you have about her in relation to him, in her relation to him now. That's what I want to know, not if you were aroused by her . . ." he paused for a moment, "by her secretions." **

When Deza suggests that Tupra and Beryl might be a couple who have grown bored with each other, Wheeler takes the opportunity to probe: "Was that what happened with you and Luisa?" Deza deftly avoids self-revelation: "I or we didn't let it get that far. It was something else, something simpler perhaps and certainly faster. Less cloying. Cleaner perhaps."

The dialogue between Deza and Wheeler extends deep into the night. Indeed, Marías pulls off a considerable narrative coup: the core of the novel is essentially a job interview, a game of conversational cat and mouse between the old spy and the younger recruit. More than in any previous novel, Marías places the evasiveness of his main characters within a conspicuous historical and political context. Wheeler reveals more about his wartime activities, and mentions a British propaganda campaign that tried to keep British subjects from inadvertently disclosing information that could reach the ears of Nazi spies. However sensible, the campaign had unwanted effects:

*{: .break one} * People were suspicious of their neighbour, their relative, their teacher, their colleague, the shopkeeper, the doctor, their wife, their husband, and many took advantage of such easy, widespread suspicions, perfectly understandable given the climate at the time, to get rid of a hated spouse. **

Such stories of distrust and opportunism lead Deza to recall his father's experiences during the Spanish Civil War, specifically his denunciation by a former friend as "a collaborator on the Moscow newspaper, *Pravda*." This

biographical detail is, of course, drawn from the life of Marías's father, and the direct engagement with Marías's family history sends a shiver of recognition through a seasoned Marías reader. The narrator, hitherto a voice in the dark, takes a step closer to the light. One cannot help noticing how many of Marías's other novels dare us—subtly here, grandly there—to mistake the narrator for the author himself; in "All Souls," the two even share the same birthday.

In this manner, Marías, like W. G. Sebald, collects deposits of belief in his books; he encourages the reader to risk taking fiction as fact. But, in fiction, belief is where the fun begins, whereas in life, Marías seems to be saying, what we believe—and what is believed about us—is where the trouble begins. At one point, Deza wonders:

***{: .break one} ** How can someone not see, in the long term, that the person who will and does end up ruining us will indeed ruin us? How can you not sense or guess at their plotting, their machinations, their circular dance, not smell their hostility or breathe their despair, not notice their slow skulking, their leisurely, languishing waiting, and the inevitable impatience that they would have had to contain for who knows how many years? How can I not know today your face tomorrow, the face that is there already or is being forged beneath the face you show me or beneath the mask you are wearing. ***

Deza suggests that his remedy for such a betrayal might be to seek vengeance. He is perplexed to learn that his father does not share this impulse. But, as his father tells him, they are different kinds of men: "You do have a tendency to hang on to things, Jacobo, and it's sometimes hard for you to let go, you're not always good at leaving things behind."

For a reader coming to the sudden, provisional end of "Fever and Spear," there is an unsettling but exhilarating sense that, while a great betrayal surely lurks down the road, there is little suggestion of where the next volumes will ultimately lead. We know that Deza has left his wife (but not why); that he

has left his life in espionage (but not how); that a woman is following him through the rainy London streets (but not who). Perhaps these questions will be answered; perhaps they will not. The truest answers may not arrive in any of the volumes of "Your Face Tomorrow"; rather, perhaps, they should be sought in the books that precede them and in those which will follow. After all, the first words of Deza's narrative turn out to be an echo of Wheeler's parting words to him, when their night of talk has run its course: "One shouldn't really ever tell anyone anything." The key word is "should"—the conditional mood. This is the mood in which all Marías's books take place; the choice between what might have been and what will always be is continuously explored. Like Nabokov in his Antiterra, like Faulkner in his imaginary South, Marías, from book to book but in one voice, has been mapping a country of his own, a Yoknapatawpha of the mind, full of tension between the desire to know and the fear of what knowledge costs. It is an old fear, and one that, in this age of surveillance, has gained ground. As another of Marías's narrators insists, "Listening is the most dangerous thing of all. . . . Listening means knowing, finding out, knowing everything there is to know, ears don't have lids that can close against the words uttered, they can't hide from what they sense they're about to hear, it's always too late." ♦

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