

AZUL SERENIDAD O LA MUERTE DE OS SERES QUERIDOS (Blue serenity or the death of loved ones)

Author: Luis Mateo Díez

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Reader: Margaret Jull Costa

The novelist, Luis Mateo Díez, was prompted to write this memoir by the deaths, within five months of each other, of his niece Sonia and his sister-in-law Charo. His niece committed suicide after suffering from depression for years and his sister-in-law died of cancer. Díez, whose own novels are full of deaths and ghosts, felt that he needed to write a consolatory book for those left behind when a loved one dies.

Sonia was a successful photographer, but seemed always to be in flight from something. She and her uncle corresponded regularly. The final section of the book provides a selection from a correspondence that consisted of photographs of the children in the playground at the back of her studio in Valencia and his responses, which were often attempts to read Sonia's own state of mind in the faces of the children.

Charo died soon after she was diagnosed with cancer, but waited until her son, Jordi, who lived far away in Réunion, could travel back to say goodbye to her. Jordi and Anton, her husband, took her ashes to the village where they had spent many a happy summer together.

The author's mind reaches back to memories of his grandparents, and how the kitchen of his paternal grandparents, left unchanged after their deaths, somehow still contains them. He recalls how his maternal grandfather would tell him stories about Mexico while he shaved, and how his maternal grandmother suffered a stroke, which affected her mind. She would weep whenever anyone left the house and rejoice when they returned. He remembers his mother's painful death from stomach cancer and his father's desolation and regret that they could not have died together. At the funeral, the family were taken aback to see their father's name already engraved on the headstone, in readiness. His father once said to the author: 'You have no idea what it's like being old', and when he died, he died literally in the author's arms. When his brothers asked the author to say a few words over his father's grave, all he could do was to weep inconsolably.

Díez states in an afterword that he wrote this book in the belief that despite the impossibility of understanding death, we must, nonetheless, try to understand it in all its forms: imminent death, long-awaited death, sudden death, voluntary death...

This is a very moving, but entirely unsentimental book, written in a wonderfully lucid style. There is no unseemly lingering over the details of his niece's death, instead, we are given a record of her life and of the legacy – in love and photographs - that she left behind.

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