Death of the Word

by Gabriel Josipovici

Yesterday I talked to my father. He stood in my room with his back to the window, facing the bed, his legs slightly apart, his hands behind his back, in the familiar posture. He has been dead for ten years.

We used to play ball when I was young, my father and I. Not football or cricket or any other known ball game, but simply 'ball'. 'Let's play ball,' my father would say, taking the beach-ball out of the cupboard under the stairs where we kept everything that didn't fit in anywhere else, and we would go out into the yard and begin the game. It started as a simple matter of throwing the ball to each other, backwards and forwards, but soon developed complex and rigid rules of its own, growing more and more violent until I would grab the ball and head for the park with it under my arm and him in hot pursuit. I remember my terror and exhilaration as I ran through the trees, hearing my father's footsteps in the grass behind me and feeling his hot breath on my neck. But nothing else. I remember nothing else. Whether he always caught me or always let me escape has vanished from my memory as completely as though we had never played at all. It is true that sometimes nowadays, while running for the bus or glancing idly out of a train window, I suddenly feel that this last part of the game is about to come back to me, but it never does. Is it that by becoming conscious of its imminent appearance I had somehow chased it away, or do I perhaps grow conscious of its presence before it has quite emerged precisely in order to prevent it from appearing? Whatever the reason, the conclusion of our ball game is lost to me, though I cannot think it can have been particularly traumatic, since we played almost every day and I was a singularly happy and untormented child.

Although my mother later told me that she admired by father greatly for his willingness to spend so much of his time with me, taking part in childish

games, I think he enjoyed it even more than I did, and that having a child provided him with a wonderful excuse to indulge in such games with a clear conscience. I sensed this, even at the time, and he too seemed to realize that I saw through his elaborate game of double bluff, pretending to enjoy himself for my sake but actually enjoying it all thoroughly himself. So that we were accomplices in this, against my mother, and, having seen through his secret, I even held him to some extent in my power. Not that I could have acted on this power in any way, for it was intangible, a feeling, a sensation, but it was none the less true that whenever my father said, 'Let's play ball,' he put himself, so to speak, in my hands. And it was this, now I come to think of it, which really formed the mainspring of our game. The ball was only an excuse, a way of controlling and articulating this new and peculiar relationship between us. So that when I picked it up and tucked it under my arm and ran for the trees, I knew deep down inside me that if he caught me he would kill me for what I knew. And I must have known too that, however hard I tried to run, he would inevitably catch and kill me, annihilate me totally so that his secret should remain hidden for ever. And this I now see was what lent the ball-game its ambiguous mixture of pleasure and terror, for is it not what we all most deeply long for and also what we fear above all else, to be annihilated by the father who begot us?

My father was a big man. When he stood in front of the window he blotted out the light. In my memory he leans over me at a dangerous angle, like the Tower of Pisa, and I can chart my growth by his progressive return to the vertical, paralleled by the progressive diminution of his size. In fact I soon overtook him, and by the age of eighteen was able, if not to look down on him, at least to look squarely into his pale blue eyes and know that he would not be able to avoid me. Not that he ever wanted to. We were always having heart-to-heart talks at that time, and he would gaze intensely at me, coming into my room late at night and standing between my desk and the bed, blotting out the light. He was a great believer in heart-to-heart talks, and would hold forth for hours about his own youth in the mountains and his relations with his own father. I never answered him when he started off on this tack, preferring to lie with my hands under my head and look at the

halo of light surrounding him. But my silence seemed to spur him to greater and greater feats of reminiscence and description, and he would end by glancing at his watch and clearing his throat, coming forward and patting me on the head, saying: 'I'm glad we understand each other so well.' I felt then and still feel that he wanted to talk to me about something but could never quite bring himself to do so, hoping that I would ask or that his endless fund of stories would lead naturally in that direction. But since he was half aware of the problem himself there could be no question of its coming up naturally, and as I never asked he never revealed to me what it was. I think he realized at moments that I was aware of something and deliberately avoided asking, and he tried to manoeuvre me into it; but he held the weaker hand and we remained as we were. I have often wondered what it was that nagged him like that and whether he would have become a different man had I allowed him to bring it out into the open, but idly, and without really looking for an answer. Certainly it was no 'thing'—guilty secret or other banal fact—which could have been taken out and exhibited or in any way dealt with by positive action. But there was undoubtedly a core of anxiety there, and had he managed to talk to me about it it would no doubt have ceased to trouble him so much—but then he would have had to be a different person and so would I and the whole question would not have arisen.

I had a letter the other day from a girl I proposed to ten years ago and who turned me down, saying that she often asked herself whether our marriage would have worked and whether we would have been happy. But what does 'we' mean in such a context? We are made by our choices. The people we are today are so different from the people we would have been had we in fact got married that the question is entirely without meaning. We are not one self but many, held together by the memories of a common past registered on our single body. That is the pathos of memory and of the sentimentality it engenders, which is the belief that one can have choice without renunciation, that one can be both what one is and what one might have been. Clearly what I am today was shaped by the girl's refusal. And yet how much of *me* was there even behind the question I put to her? I wonder.

My father was incurably sentimental. I think I felt this from quite early

on. I was repelled by his constant attempts to hold on to the moment and replay it to himself as it were, with me as the necessary audience. It frightened me, especially—perhaps only—because he was my father. After all, he was there before me. He will loom over me, between my bed and the light, for the rest of my life.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. We cannot imagine that what has been there when we arrive will one day cease to exist. It has about it the permanence of the unquestionable. For our parents to die is as unthinkable as that the world should one day disappear. That is why the death of a father is the traumatic event of a lifetime. It pushed Freud into writing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and one wonders how Kafka's work would have altered if his father had preceded him to the grave. Mourning and melancholia, Freud said, are our two ways of responding to this catastrophic event, but that is perhaps to see the matter in too crude a light (though it must be said in fairness that Freud was as well aware of this as anyone). We are never really in doubt about our own mortality, though we try to suppress the knowledge of it as much as possible, hoping against hope that a miracle will occur and that we, of all the multitudes who have existed since the creation of the world, will prove immortal. Far worse, because so totally unthinkable, is the fact of a father's death. We use thought to protect ourselves from pain; what cannot be thought pierces us where we are weakest and we succumb.

I remember the day my father died. It was the middle of winter. The trees were bare. The snow had come and gone and come again and was now melting in black puddles on the edges of the pavements. My mother rang me up, telling me to come at once, and I put down the phone and walked straight out of the house and up to the station. I don't know how long I waited for the train or how long the train took to get there, but when I arrived he was dead. When I arrived he was dead.

He had a way of lying in bed with his feet sticking up through the blankets which my eldest son also favours. In many ways they are alike, and in my son I seem to see my father, as though they were one and the same person and had no use for me, holding them apart, but would crush me be-

tween them and regain their lost unity. It is normal, I believe, for fathers to see themselves in their sons—their youthful selves, hopes unblighted, the world before them. But this is only another instance of sentimentality and I will have no truck with it.

I remember walking with my son along an alley-way lined with trees. It was autumn and the leaves were thick on the ground. It had been a dry summer and they were yellower than honey. My son waved his arms as he talked, driving home his points, each with a gesture, and I thought suddenly that I would always be in the position of listening and watching while others drove home their points. When I wake up nowadays I often have the feeling that we have just emerged from that long alley-way with the autumn trees and the thick carpet of leaves, and that it is impossible for us to turn round and walk slowly back the other way.

The other day I woke up like that, with the sense of that tree-lined alley-way still vivid in my mind and body. It was night. In the distance I heard lorries rumbling through the city. The street-light shone brightly outside the window and patterned the ceiling with unreal colours. The house was silent though someone coughed overhead. It is odd that there are no books on the classification of coughs heard in the night. They are so many and so varied. The unreal sounds of a buried world. I sat at the window and watched the empty street, while the sky changed from yellow to pink and then to streaky blue. When the light in the street went out I returned to bed, careful to make no sound, for the springs creak dreadfully and I do not like to advertise my presence to all and sundry.

I was looking out of the kitchen window the day my father died. It was the middle of winter. The trees were bare. The snow had come and gone and come again and was now melting in black puddles on the edges of the pavements. I had switched on the electric kettle to make some coffee and was looking out of the window at the white sky when the phone rang. I went out into the hall and picked up the receiver, leaving the door open so that I could go on looking at the sky. When I heard what my mother had to say I put down the receiver and walked straight out of the house and to the station, forgetting about the kettle. Nothing fused but the kettle was ruined.

The trees were bare. The snow had come and gone. When I got there he was dead. They had thrown a sheet over him and he lay there as he used to do on Sundays, with his feet sticking up through the blankets in a way my son also favours. In many ways they are alike, my father and my eldest son.

I remember walking with my son along an alley-way lined with trees. It was autumn and the leaves were thick on the ground. It had been a dry summer.

It had been a dry summer. I remember thinking

But why should I go on? Where have they come from, these winters and summers, these autumns and springs, these white skies and yellow skies and streaky blue skies, these gesticulating sons and honey leaves? They have nothing to do with me or with my father.

I sit in my room. Other people move about. Doors open and close as they go off to work. Fortunately I am spared the necessity of doing so myself. I make some tea and tidy the bed. Then I sit in the armchair and look out of the window and think about my father.

Yesterday I talked to my father. He stood in my room with his back to the window, facing the bed, in the familiar posture. He has been dead for ten years. I remember the day he

I remember nothing. No wife. No sons. No autumn days or ruined kettles. And then it must be said: no room either, with bed and chair, banging doors or coughing neighbours. I sit at my desk and write: Yesterday I talked to my father. And then I have to admit: no father either. Oh I must have had one once, but not that kind, not that kind. No ball-game. No heart-to-heart talks. No secret complicity. No phone call. No death.

But now I have said that I being to understand. I see that I do after all have a father. He is the first sentence I wrote down: Yesterday I talked to my father. Before today there was yesterday. Before that, another day. Before the first word, another word, making the first one possible. Without that, without my father, a time before, there could be no present, no future. I

would suffocate.

My father is the phrase that begins it all and also that against which it is all directed. For now it is clear to me that these so-called memories which have come to me in the wake of that initial sentence have had only one purpose: to oust my father from his pre-eminent position, to annihilate him, to remove him forever from his place between myself and the light.

He was there: framed in the window, black upon white. But now that I have succeeded in removing him, first by casting doubt upon his motives, then by casting doubt upon his existence, I find it difficult to go on. Without my father, against whom to push, I cannot continue. If there is no room, no bed, no chair, no father blotting out the light, then what am I and where am I? I am only this sentence, hesitating, uncertain, with nowhere to go and nothing to say any more. It is as though the assassination of my father had started my own slow death, since even saying I am this sentence means nothing any more, now that the pretext has gone, body blotting out the light, standing between me and the window, and all that is left is pure light, white page at last, waiting with infinite patience as the sentence vacillates, falters, and I gather myself for one last hopeless cry: Father, father, why have you forsaken me?