

*No, the living have no pity on the dead
And what would the dead do with the pity of the living
For the heart of the living is hard as a living tree
and they go their strong and vivid way
Though the heart of the dead lies bleeding
and stricken with grief
And all a prey to blows, too open to blows
with its uncovered carcass
For the living going their way have no pity on the dead
Who remain with their hearts uncovered to the wind*

'La mort grandissante'

— Saint-Denys Garneau, tr. John Glassco

I learn of the death of my friends much as others discover their lottery ticket still doesn't have the winning number. This week I lost yet another Hervé and it was statistically predictable: all of my friends are named Hervé and are, for the most part, HIV-positive.

Death by statistics delivers us from nothing. Certainly not from the unpredictability of death.

I haven't gotten used to death. I never see it coming. Hervé's death goes splash! Just splash and it's over ... A splash that keeps making me jump. One repetitious splash.

Survivor guilt, and yet I too will die. It's statistically predictable. But what kind of certainty does that grant?

When I mentioned Hervé's name to Flora, I knew to expect the worst. Her hand began immediately to seek out the corner of the table and her body bent dangerously under the weight of words she could barely speak: 'It's terrible, terrible for his parents.' I believe she was thinking of her own children, Hervé's age, her children who are now parents, her children, well inscribed into her lineage, whom she wants never ever to see die. And me, all I could think of were Flora's worries, her family, weddings, births and, far away, at the back of my mind, I could only just see Hervé, in very small. Hervé dead. Some vague thing. Hervé lying on a daybed. His body, ten years younger, already thin, in a dignified pose – that, I suppose, conferred by death and

embalmers. 'It happened so quickly,' stammered Flora in tears. 'He hadn't said a thing to his parents, not a word. Nothing. And then, one week before his death, he had them sent for. It's funny, isn't it, that exclusion? And then at the last minute ... It just goes to show ...' The image of Hervé becomes confused with that of another Hervé, dead two years ago, whom I had to see exposed to the four winds in his black coffin and his grey shirt. Hervé is dead. And it's the body of another Hervé that returns to haunt me, as Flora explains between sobs how her son Benjamin announced the death of Hervé. 'The death of Hervé.' How much longer will I have to keep hearing this? Yet it's a well-known scenario. A familiar word. Too familiar. Whose meaning I forget with each Hervé who dies. 'Hervé was at our daughter's wedding last summer, and yet he seemed well ... It just goes to show ...' What was Hervé doing at a fucking wedding? He who hated families, happy unions, and could tolerate only my silence and my *douleur de vivre*. What was he doing at Marie's wedding, when he knew he was ill and would soon be dead, when he could speak of his illness to no one and under no circumstances? Whatever possessed him to set foot at the wedding of that twit, Marie, he who could only sabotage other people's conjugal bliss? What was he thinking? That I can never know because when it comes to death I know only what I have learned from my friends, dead or ill, and they've never told me how to understand the incoherence of our lives and of our deaths. With them, I learn to understand nothing, and most of all I learn not to understand their deaths. I refuse to understand. I refuse to abide by the law of some such knowledge, of a possible

reason. Death is scandalous. There's nothing I can do about it. That's the way it is.

When it comes to death, I'm a dunce, I'm a moron, I'm thick as a brick.

I must be giving Flora my crazy look, my hysterical look, my mad look, the look of someone in the throes of great anguish who has entered into a pact with the devil, because I can sense her growing fear of me. She asks me to sit down. While looking hard at her through my hollow eyes, which are still wandering the edges of my mind over something resembling Hervé's ridiculously minuscule, shrivelled body, I dare to ask, 'How did Hervé die?' I know the answer by heart for having heard it regarding so many Hervés. But with each Hervé, I want to hear it again. I have a possessive desire for that word which reassures and disgusts me with its cloying familiarity. I desire: AIDS. That's the word Flora mutters, or maybe I'm the one who pronounces the word that is enemy and life companion. Maybe I'm the one who speaks, or it's AIDS that speaks through me, through Flora and life at large. Because it seems to me that for years we say nothing other than AIDS – it devours, it ventriloquizes us.

The image of Hervé disappears, as though consumed by photographic acid. I see a grave, flowers petrified by frost. The hardness of stone. Crosses. Grey. Nothing. The cemetery. The name 'Hervé.' That's all. Hervé's surname is already gone from my memory and yet Flora hasn't stopped repeating it since the beginning of this absurd conversation.

'Where is Hervé buried?' The question moves through my body, and I squirm in my chair up, down and from left to right. Here I am, made into a witch at the stake of truth,

a witch who cannot stop writhing, possessed as she is. And in front of the witch, Flora continues to speak, to hold forth, as though nothing were the matter, about Hervé's parents; she can't stop herself from giving news of a sadness, a very great sadness. 'Where is Hervé?' I say, panic-stricken by the meaning of such dismal and particularly derisory words. 'At the Montmartre cemetery.' Of course. There, of course, where Hervé always wanted me to accompany him on his walks, and where I so often refused to go. At the time, I found that strolling around the cemetery was too convergent with my dramatic doubts, with my mad desires for violent deaths, with my wild attempts at spectacular suicides. Strolls through the cemetery were dangerous for me. My own dreams were strewn with cadavers; I saw night and earth open and swallow me, so close to the stone tomb, I refused to play with death anymore, to let myself be seduced by its calm, its gravity. You're nothing but a fucking cocksucker, Hervé! From now on I have to go and visit you in Montmartre on my trips to France. Now I am forced to go the cemetery. And what's more, you won't even be there to laugh at my fears and superstitions, my insanity, you won't be there to call me to the futile order of death. I'll walk that road alone. Alone or perhaps with Olga, and maybe even the dog, if dogs are allowed in French cemeteries, which I doubt. They must go completely mad, with all those bones sealed into stone, and especially with that strong odour of rotting flesh, which likely makes them salivate and drool all the more.

Hervé hated dogs, if I remember correctly. Our tastes disappear so quickly after death. If Hervé did hate dogs, as in

my memory, visiting his grave with my dog will be my revenge. I need to make Hervé pay for his death. I need to insult him. To spit on his grave, or to have my dog piss on his epitaph. I need, stupidly, to seek revenge. But for what?

It's been ages since Hervé 'neither should, nor could, nor would see me again.' It's been ages since he decided to drown me in the dark silence of his disappearance, to create in me, as he wrote last time, 'a malaise.'

At Hervé's first disappearance, I didn't react. I let time pass, the way one lets someone pass in front, out of courtesy. I held the intimate conviction that I would see Hervé again someday, that we would have it out. I didn't want to give in to Hervé's terrorism, to his frenetic desire to frighten me.

He enjoined me to speak to some truth, to speak à la Heidegger. He denied me gossip, distraction, futility, and I suspected that he wanted me to speak to him in German from time to time. I never liked Heidegger and I have no leanings whatsoever toward the Black Forest or, for that matter, roads that lead nowhere. I only like travel by airplane or by spaceship and dreary cities where people die face first against the concrete of murky sidewalks. All my academic friends are Heideggerians. As for me, I like talking, and, what's more, yelling, when I have nothing to say; I am allergic to German, it reminds me of war movies I watched as a child, and I despise Greek, poetry and the countryside.

Anyway, I couldn't ever be a Heideggerian, even if I wanted to. Heideggerians would denounce me pronto. The unveiling of being bores me to tears, and Hervé also bored me when he dove into his philosophical delirium. I preferred listening with him to Mahler and his

Kindertotenlieder. Together, we would criticize the inane and comatose air music lovers espouse, the same look that musicians acquire with devotional intensity.

When it came to music, we could have a laugh, since Hervé was an excellent musician. But he was also a very bad philosopher. I know how infuriated he would be to read these words; I know he would resent me for thinking that way, I know he'd call me a bitch, a cow, an illiterate and a dumb shit. That's where my betrayal lies, from the first lines of these talkative pages; it's in me. And, very strangely, I know that Hervé too is a traitor. But despite his betrayals, his silences and his disappearances, I know that he loved me. Just as I love him – I love him madly through my verbosity, just as I loved him through my unprofound and sullen silence which lasted several years.

Hervé's curse hit me with his first disappearance. I know he cursed me for not having answered his breakup letter. I know that he hated me for leaving him alone with his rage, but what did you want? For me to become a Heideggerian? I know you hated me for not being on your level, or, rather, for refusing the pure air of your German mountains, which give me vertigo. I know that you forgot me, wishing the worst on me, praying for my death. But I also know that when we crossed paths in Paris without exchanging a word, after several years of silence, in the movie theatre where they were showing Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, you were there for me. You knew I was playing a major role in that film, a role you hoped never to see me play again. At *Petra* we could have become friends once more, but at our chance encounter, between you who never went out, and

me who lived 5,000 km away from the Halles cinema (and from all of civilization, or so you thought), everything was said: 'One day, we will be able to acknowledge how much we loved one another in the absurd and tragic power of our shared hatred, in the cutting passion of our mutual rage.'

Hervé, your curse hit me right in the face. I had well over seven years of bad luck and you were likely right to curse me. I know that in death you continue to do so. I know you're capable of that. Of course you are. Every day delivers a different stroke of bad luck. You should be happy, you can contemplate with joy the spectacle of my misfortune. I know that you would be absolutely delighted at the face I made when Flora told me of your death. You loved seeing me speechless, haggard, disoriented, as close as possible to being. As for you, I'd rather hold on to your kindness, your love. And it's your love that I'm inscribing here. What you don't know is that my life is also written among the words you gave me, among the dreams in which you had me live. And when I did find happiness, it was you I wanted to write to. It was as you had predicted. You wouldn't like Olga, you would hate the dog, you would curse the cat. You would denounce my idiocy, my beliefs, my fevers, my fervour, my tenderness and my cruelty. I wanted to call and tell you everything, to add something to your long list of recriminations, accusations and truth especially, but I was waiting for the right moment. So, it seems you're dead. You told me you would be old one day. Maybe you were old, that old age conferred by illness that Hervé Guibert talked about shortly before his own death. Did you read Hervé Guibert? Did you know that for years I have been working on him? Of course,

it was for you and you know it even if I didn't know anything about your AIDS. And, despite your death, here I am inventing the auspicious moment of our reunion. Time staged our separation, but I reject time, history, and I am conversing here, now, with you. The only conversations to be had are with the dead, with Mahler or with those who are now silent. I hope that while you were alive, I represented someone dead with whom you chatted from time to time, I hope that I answered you and that I made missed appointments with you in some Parisian movie theatre. Telepathy of the dead we were to one another.

Hervé, I'm taking on your curse. I'm turning it into cries, I'm turning it into tears that you never stopped shedding for me despite your imprecations and your violent silence. I'll make it into a spray of flowers and lay it on your grave.

'Would you like me to drive you home, Catherine? I'm leaving,' said Flora, suddenly digging her eyes into mine, as if to reach something in me resembling reason. 'No, that's very kind, I'll walk. What did Hervé do? What was his new job?' 'He was in advertising. You didn't know?' No, I didn't know that Heideggerians could one day move into advertising. Did Hervé laugh at his lost innocence? Did he think of me and my futility when he accepted such a job? I wouldn't be surprised.

With Flora gone, I find myself smack in the middle of a party at Bob's where all the guests unconsciously avoid approaching the wingback chair in which I reel, in which I capsize, in which I will end up drowned. I would like to get up and most of all to call Olga. Tell her of Hervé's death.

Talk to Olga who is at home with the animals and who will take me in her arms, she to whom all I do is bring home heaps of dead. Cartloads of them.

At Bob's, they all speak English and suddenly I can't remember the word for 'telephone.' I try in French. They seem to understand me. Another death to announce, another death to inter. I have become the cemetery of our deceased friends. Watch out, you better stop croaking, I'm almost full to capacity.

Olga's voice wraps around me, understands me, awaits me; Olga's voice will clean me of my tears. Here I am now, holding Bob, that giant, in my arms. I am smothering him under the weight of all my dead Hervés, and I'm yelling into his ear, gripping his jacket clumsily: 'You take care of yourself.' Bob watched all of his friends die, so he knows that when I hold people like this to the point of strangulation, it's because Hervé is dead. I look for my bag, I don't find it. I make up my mind anyway and set out again suddenly, hysterically, on the highway of grief where I'm doing 160 kilometres an hour, where I'm driving furiously, my hair in the wind, my heart heavy with the death of other people. I take off like a shot, one friend lighter, one death heavier. 'I am a graveyard that the moon abhors.'

On the street, I want to sing my head off, I want to squeal my tires, to cry, to howl your name: Hervé! You often told me I could carry a tune, but how useless was that ability since in your view I had no voice. And it's true, I don't have the voice I need to shatter the world beneath cries of your name.

It's still sunny and this mild June violently rocks the road as it flashes by at full speed. June: the month of the dead.

But I could just as easily say that of July, August, December, April and the whole calendar. And why not insitute entire years as years of the dead? Every day I drive over the barely cold bodies of my deceased friends. And me, I run down everything in my path. I lean on the pedal of life. Full tilt.

Five years ago, on the trip from Québec to Baie-Saint-Paul, the taxi driver, a totally hyper guy, confided to Olga and me that the road on which we were happily doing close to 200 an hour was nicknamed, and with good reason, the highway of death. This guy had already buried nineteen of his friends, twelve of whom died on this road. For a thirty-year-old, having seen so much death over the course of one's existence was quite an accomplishment, and I wondered whether he wasn't better suited than me to write a book about the dead. I've resigned myself, I have no claim over it. There will always be someone more competent or more talented than me in this department. Death is unfortunately not an exclusive domain.

While the driver led us, at death-defying speeds, along a pilgrimage through all the intersections at which his friends had left their lives, I noted death's association with arithmetic, I thought of how much death is now managed mathematically. Insurance companies know all about that. Of all the countries in the world, Canada is where people have the most insurance. For everything: theft, fire, life, death, illness, poverty. Everything. Québec has among the highest rates of suicide and deodorant consumption per capita. Does that indicate some particular thing, draw a particular conclusion, instigate some particular mode of reasoning? Statistics – they are said to speak for themselves and I

believe it. Mathematics and death – these two entities maintain a close relationship and I don't believe, like Heidegger, that bureaucracy, or for that matter accounting, veils our relationship to being when it comes to death. On the contrary – statistics are one part of a tragic destiny. In my opinion, they embody the remains of a kind of predestination which has become collective.

A young twenty-year-old woman is killed just outside my window by a seventy-nine-year-old driver. She had just finished her studies, found work as an actuary for an insurance company. In fact, she had just been put in charge of accidental deaths. Thus she was working on the statistics of her own death. Numbers don't mean anything?

The cab driver tells Olga and me how lucky he is to have survived an accident in which his brother died in his place. But he seldom speaks of his brother's death; he is happy to talk to us about his survival, to be here to impart his bullshit stories. The stupidity of survivors. The stupidity of my declarations throughout this book. To survive, as if that's all that mattered. The cabbie laughs because he is alive and, whereas Olga is not doing at all well, since she can't avoid thinking of her grandparents who live on the edge of this road of death which they have to take every day, I am thinking of Anne Frank. Who didn't survive, who didn't come back from the dead. Many people in the camps weren't gassed, but died of exhaustion, hunger, illness, fatigue, sadness, horror ... Dead from not having been able to survive that. We musn't forget: death isn't all theatrical, death isn't all for Spielberg movies, death isn't all for classical music remixes. Most of all, there is death for nothing. In the movie *Anne Frank*

Remembered, Anne's childhood friend suggests that she might have survived had she known her father was still living. But since she believed her whole family was dead, she didn't struggle. Survive whom? What? For whom? For what? And for how long?

I will never know why Anne Frank was unable to survive, but I know that all the admirers of the late doyenne des Français, the oldest woman in France, petrify me with horror. There's something terrifying about the cult of survivors in the game of death. 'How wonderful that the doyenne des Français survived it all: the death of her parents, her friends, her brothers, her sisters, her children, her grandchildren and her great-grandchildren! Isn't it wonderful to have buried all those people and still want to carry on! How we would have liked to help her bury one or two more generations! Such hope for humanity.' And all the while, my Hervés die in the most absolute silence, the silence of friends who are already dead.