About Jacques Salles: An Homage (In Memorian Jacques SALLES- 1924/2018)

For Recitant, double basses or strings

1. When I think of you, I do not see an old man. I see sparkling blue eyes, full of a life well-lived. I see grandchildren and great-grandchildren vying for attention; I see the teacher’s habit of counting heads, making sure all are present, worrying when somebody is late. I see you sitting quietly under the mulberry tree, filling in your daily crosswords; I see your enjoyment whenyou discover a new word. And I hear your voice, telling stories.
2. In those empty hours, when your crossword was completed and lunch wasn’t yet served, or just after your nap in the afternoon, you would talk. You would tell stories from the past, from before any of us knew you. Stories of your first teaching job in the Pyrenees, walking to school on your first day: up the mountain, in the dark with snow up to your knees. Stories from the early days of your marriage
3. I remember you telling me about the birth of your first child, and how, when you were told the sex, you shouted out (and even now, 70 years later, you had the good grace to look ashamed): “She couldn’t even bloody well give me a son!” “I don’t know why I said that,” you smiled. “I didn’t even think it, I was happy to be a father and to have a little girl! Everybody must have thought I was a terrible macho! Ah well, things were different back then.”
4. But the story I remember the most is the one about the gypsy girl. You were a young boy, and you met her on the beach in Canet. “She read my future,” you said. “She looked at my palm, and told me that I would die shortly after my 21st birthday. And I believed her. The year I turned 21, it was 1945 and I was a prisoner of war in Germany. The war was coming to an end and every night, the bombs fell. Not just one or two, but all night, every night, for weeks and weeks, bombs rained down on us and my friends all died one by one. Everybody was frightened – everybody, but me. I wasn’t frightened because I knew I would die; the gypsy-girl had told me so. Every evening, I lay down knowing that I would not get up the next day. And the next day, I got up and shovelled up pieces of my friends with a spade. Shovelled them up. Everybody thought that I had been born under a lucky star and held me close like a four-leaf clover, because the bombs fell all around me but never touched me, not even once, and in any case, I wasn’t frightened. I wasn’t frightened because I knew I should die. I was 21 years old.”
5. Jacques Salles –father, grandfather, great-grandfather; father-in-law, husband

and friend – was an extraordinary man. A man who should have died at the age of 21, but who carried on living until his 95th year. He was extraordinary in his intelligence, his generosity, his kindness. Extraordinary in his temper and his dark moods, too – better to avoid him on those days.He was extraordinarily stubborn. Extraordinarily honest. Quite simply extraordinary.

1. To finish, I turn to a writer far more talented than myself: Shakespeare, who understood that in death, we find peace, even if that is difficult to accept for those left behind.

Fear no more the heat o’th’sun,

Nor the furious winter’s rages.

Thou thy worldly task hast done,

Home art gone and ta’en thy wages.

Golden lads and girls all must,

As chimney sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o’th’great,

Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke.

Care no more to clothe and eat,

To thee the reed is as the oak.

The sceptre, learning, physic, must

All follow this and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning flash,

Nor th’all-dreaded thunder-stone.

Fear not slander, censure rash.

Thou hast finished joy and moan.

All lovers young, all lovers must

Consign to thee and come to dust.

Eleanor Martindale 18/10/2018