

Stammered Songbook

A Mother's Book of Hours

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An extract pp (7-30)

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Today my mother gave me a thorough dusting, thinking I was a piece of furniture. Perhaps a chest of drawers or an old cooker. She ran a bright yellow duster over my shirt buttons towards my neck, waved it about around my ears and dusted my chin. Then she motioned for me to open my mouth—stuffed the duster in and forgot us.

She's lying on the sofa, on the rug, slumped back oddly against the cushion. My father says: it's not getting any better. I lean across her face and ask: do you know who I am? She smiles, a faint crease of her mouth, which has become virtually lipless.

She nods. Yes, she says, I know.

And her smile broadens, and seems to pump the lips full of blood, cover her jaws with flesh. Her eyes, which are like tin coins, impenetrably hazy, brighten between eyelids that lose their texture of flaky skin and inflammation and have eyelashes once again. The sunken cheeks become rounded, as if her smile travels through all her limbs, smoothing every wrinkle in her body that is old before its time, and making the happiness of a very young girl come tumbling out through her tissues.

She gets up, claps her hands. She wants to dance.

She waves her arms; I hear her sigh, and in her eyes is the rapture of a child that has only just learned to walk and strolls proudly down garden paths. Then her legs slip out from under her, she scrambles upright—and once more she slides over, and again.

Sometimes she falls into my father's arms, giggling as if slightly tipsy, sometimes backwards against me. I pull her up with my arms under her armpits. Her legs thrash, her soles try to gain a grip on the floor, the back of her head tips from side to side across my ribcage like the disproportionate head of an infant on wobbly vertebrae. Her muscles, those lame strings attached to her bones, tremble, tighten, relax, her breath whines through her body, and her hands with their swollen

fingers clutch the back of my hand. My father smiles faintly and looks for a chair to set her down on.

I wake up and realize that I must have cried in that dream. Death that sits at table here is called Mum. It sits at the head of the table, cloaking both her and us in sorrow, the familiar place that it has claimed for itself for months with her shuffling tread from the front door to the dining room. My mother, the crow with a cold with that one teardrop always on her beak. Our nest, once so fleshy, is a buckled cage with a mechanical songbird rusting away inside.

This is the mouth I gazed at for heaven knows how long in the cradle. This is the mouth whose gymnastics of caressing, whisper and lullaby must have pulled me upright on the slippery surface of words. This is the mouth that is now shedding its language, stripping the words vowel by vowel into puffs of breath, gnashing of the teeth, smacking of the lips. Sometimes she mumbles out mouthfuls of porridge, and it's me who listens and with a handkerchief wipes the mess of words off her chin.

It begins—but when does something like that begin, what signs are the first? It begins with the word “book”, the word she just can't think of as she stands looking at my library one afternoon and asks when I'll next be ...ing, you know, one of those things, will I soon be ...ing another—and she brings her hands side by side, fingers outstretched, and opens and shuts them. Was I going to do it again, that writing what do you call it, one of those things. She gives my father a nudge with her elbow: you say, you know.

I think: I must sit right opposite her, where my father usually sits, and then she'll see there's someone there. Only when I bring my face close to hers, I think, does that stubborn fog in her eyes lift.

I say—I've said it so often recently—do you recognize me? You know who I am, don't you?

And she nods and she laughs, and I ask: did Marc drop in? And she nods again. Yes, she says—the first word for a month and a half. And why did he come by, Marc, on Friday?

She shrugs her shoulders. Don't know, don't know, she says, and her face contorts and she cries.

I take her hand in mine. Why are you crying? You mustn't be sad; we're here, aren't we? And then my father comes in. She follows him with her eyes from the cupboard to the table; she doesn't lose sight of him for a moment.

I think she knows a lot, he says.

I realize that I only write to hear sentences dancing without interruption through my head. To make rhythm, acceleration, rallentando, to make pauses sing. Just to be able to hang from dashes—the trapezes of syntax—weightlessly for a moment from the roof beam of a sentence, I let these words loose. What luxury it is to be able to swing through the rainforests of language from creeper to creeper like a performing monkey.

Or did it begin when she stopped going to the choir? Normally she never missed a Thursday. She said she was hoarse, that her voice was going. Perhaps she realized she could no longer read music, the last “language” she had learned. Was she already ill when she became restless if we arrived unannounced, we, my brothers, sisters and their brood? Her silent panic in front of the kitchen

unit, because she couldn't manage to lay the table. The sudden crying fits, usually after she had lashed out at my father. The crying that, I now realize, had to make up for the increasing shortage of words. But at the time we laughed it off. It'll blow over, we said, isn't her menopause finished yet?

How must it feel to see the world around you lose its contours, the whole network of language, language memory, which hangs over things so unemphatically that we only notice it when it develops holes? Does everything become hazy, or does it, on the contrary, stand out more sharply as the unsayable gains strength?

He has become her memory. More and more often she comes in uncertainly, a little closer to him. Her senses are starting to stumble. If she can't get any further than stammering, she looks at him wide-eyed. If the answer doesn't come quickly, there is a hail of reproach. You really forget everything! She moans. And to me: he can't remember anything. It's awful.

What strikes me most about her, what makes me saddest, is the double silence of her being. Language has packed its bags and jumped over the railing of the capsizing ship, but there is also another silence in her or around her. I can no longer hear the music of her soul; the existential aura around her, that whole vibrating fabric of symbols with which she wove herself into the world—or, conversely, the world into her.

I am very sensitive to that whole system, that web, that network, which constitutes our being and which for want of a better designation I still call our soul. It is the subtle poetry, the tragedy, the beauty, the microscopic dread which every concrete life carries with it and in some way is able to emanate wordlessly. People have their own echo; I find it hard to explain. I can sometimes hear the white noise of their existence, the snatches of music—and they sound nice or not and in me too the whole human fanfare reverberates, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes shrilly.

But with her I hear scarcely a thing any more, sometimes the same kind of whoosh that first struck me when I was very young and one night the château was ablaze. I remember looking at the sea of flame and as we got closer was surprised that it did not spread silently. I heard the inferno softly shrieking. Somewhere in those caverns of fire and dense smoke glass burst into smithereens, burning beams whistled, stones cracked, etc. I now hear something similar in her: a faint lament of virtually soundless, all-embracing decay.

He cooks scrambled eggs for her, and lovingly puts the pan on the table. She gives him a look of displeasure and shakes her head, grumbling.

You know I don't like scrambled eggs, she says. I only eat fried eggs.

Fried eggs used to make her gag. She only liked omelettes.

He puts the pan aside, fries two eggs and eats the scrambled eggs himself.

She's changing, he says.

She's becoming more silent every day. More and more tears have to replace the words that have vanished into thin air. Sometimes her lips move, the corners of her mouth tremble, and she produces a short burst of sighing. Then it seems there are still thoughts there, but on different wavelengths, beyond the range of my eardrum. I think of her as if she were an old valve radio, the

kind I used to see in elderly relations' houses. I'm thinking of the interference and the snatches of voices when the tuner moved through the frequencies. Sometimes she seems in despair and for a moment her brain seems to be searching: stammering, stuttering, lots of silence.

Her "I" is becoming lost. That "something" that makes people so recognizably themselves. The whole repertoire of habits, ways of talking, sleeping, walking, standing, it's all changing. A kind of hybrid person is being created from traits and behavior that I can remember as hers, and others which are unknown and perplexing, as if a parasitic consciousness is emerging in her flesh.

And then those afternoons when we sit at table and do our best not to lose patience when for the umpteenth time she gets stuck in mid-sentence. I can almost see the sentences stumbling over her lips. Verbal rubble, grammatical ruins lie strewn around her over the tablecloth.

Yes, that's it, she says each time we finish the sentence for her—as one finishes off a lame horse.

My father looks at me and raises his eyebrows meaningfully.

It's only the beginning, I say while she is in the bathroom. I have resolved never to give false hope, but it feels as if I am gouging a knife into myself and into him, into his melancholy father's flesh.

Afternoons full of the pack ice of silence, ice floes of silence, when I think: if only I could hear her say everyday banalities just once more.

Would you like some coffee?

Are you hungry?

You will be staying for supper, won't you?

Apart from that we do the best we can not to regard the slow death that is taking place at home as an ordeal—which is not an obvious reaction. Rationally I can only hope that my mother won't have to suffer much longer, because it's so pointless. She has scarcely any awareness left of time, place or other people. The flamboyant woman who always liked life and pleasure around her has become a twisted, emaciated figure who shuffles down the garden path to the car, laboriously opens the door and sits in it, presumably because she feels safe in the little Peugeot, that tin womb.

It breaks my heart to see it.

At the same time I find the thought of her no longer being there at all chilling, and I'm also rather concerned about my father, who at present with great patience and devotion is postponing his grief—a suitcase that is becoming heavier and heavier... Sometimes I am struck by the lack of feeling of my fellow human beings, for example when I hear that it's terrible, of course, but that sixty-five isn't that young any more. As if there's an age at which you can abandon someone to their fate.

We write poems—that is, attempts at eloquent complaints about the whims of fate and destiny, against the structure of the universe and ourselves. But there is no sign of life at the window concerned, while the queue grows longer and longer—and an A4 sheet is stuck on the glass, announcing: our customer services department is never open.

I babysat her for an afternoon. She was restless and sometimes aggressive. She wanted to wander off. My father had gone to watch my nephews play football. I had to bolt the back door.

After a while she calmed down, and then we—I can't call it anything else—"played house", but without the pleasure children get from it. She brought a pair of Dad's trousers from the bathroom. First she wanted me to put them on, probably so I would look like him. Then I had to fold the trousers up for her. She took them over to the table. I had to smooth the bundle for her. Then she wanted to step out of her shoes and into her slippers, and out of her slippers into her shoes, and into her slippers again. Then into bed for a moment—and me on the landing crying, waiting for her to get up again (she always gets up, always, after about five minutes).

Only after two hours or so did she calm down completely. Sat shivering in the chair downstairs. I asked: are you cold?

She nodded.

Helped her into her knitted jacket, and then sat next to her. I rubbed her back, and she occasionally rubbed my belly with the back of her hand.

Sometimes she looked up and fixed me with a searching gaze. It is horrible to detect something in her pupils of the hopeless battle that must be being waged in her head, the dogged struggle, doomed to defeat.

I regularly think: let her die, let her go in her sleep, which is almost never a peaceful sleep any more, but irritable slumber, as if sleep eludes her even in her sleep—like everything else. A year ago she sat on her chair all day long when the radio broadcast Bach, as if the divine order of his music disentangled the knots in her head.

She sat there the whole day, and even held her palm against the speaker. She motioned us to be quiet as she didn't want to miss anything.

How jealous of Bach I was.

Sometimes I dream that you're dead, that I'm standing by your body in which the devastation has taken place, and I don't know if I'm relieved or sad. I just feel a searing pain in my chest, and I think: this is the price of my birthright, the settling of accounts for what was agreed when I fell from your pelvis forty-four years ago, without you or me being involved.

At the party in the garden, among all those people, in the shade and in the sun, you walked back and forth between the tables on the grass, abandoned, uncomprehending. If the hectic behaviour of the playing children and screaming on the trampoline became too much for you, you went into the house, where you stared out of the window. You used to be the life and soul of the party, now you're a ghost wandering through the house. In the afternoon you slept in the deckchair, in the shade of the silver birch, while we ate at a table next to you. We all looked over our shoulder now and then at your sleep, which was peaceful.

Sometimes Veerle asked: is she still breathing? And An said: it would be a nice death, slipping away with all those children round her.

I have resolved only to start crying when she is actually completely dead—that is, cold and no longer breathing. There is a bucket of amorphous pain inside me, into which I regularly tip all sorts of things before closing the lid again, and what eventually comes out of it and how, liquid or in splodges, we shall see. Give me the benefit of your understanding when it comes to the point. Today, I sat writing in the garden, which was exploding around me in growth—and me in the middle of it all, something like delicately blown glass on which the sun was breaking its milk teeth. The clouds were doing their best to look like Spanish armies, from the time of the Duke of Alva, with lances and halberds. The large specimens formed into citadels with steaming battlements to be captured—but there was one that couldn't be bothered and preferred to act in turn as a wheelbarrow, a tea cosy and a tricycle.

I had to persuade Dad that it has gradually become necessary to provide permanent residential care for my mother. He is aware of that, but finds it difficult to take in. He considers it betrayal, he feels guilty. So it was a cautious conversation. I with all my antennae alert steering a course round many cliffs so as not to offend him. He nodding, saying nothing, sobbing. But the conclusion was that shortly I shall be going to the nursing home with one of my sisters and putting Mum on the waiting list. So in a few months, given her condition, she will be leaving the house for good.

After the first shock he realizes that it is not the best but the least bad solution, and so do I. Nevertheless I am racked with guilt. I am pushing my mother out of the house, because there's no alternative. My father is crying with misery. Oh, I say nothing, I look out of the window at how beautifully blue the evening is. The white poplar waves a thousand grey-green crib sheets at once.

There has been so much death in the last few years. Every few months or so standing at the deathbed of someone close numbs the heart. I should get the ash washed out of my pores. I should like once again to be the creature with the thousand vibrating cilia that shimmers with a rapture approaching despair at each leaf that falls from a branch, each fall of light or the ecstatic proximity of a still-unknown body with the bronze boom of all the intertwined histories, all the fears and longings it harbours, and which I want to read like braille, until the ink splashes onto the page out of sheer abundance. Without it writing is harder.

Stupidity, selfishness and health, that's what you need to be happy. But if the first is lacking, all is lost (Flaubert).

Day in, day out she walks round the house. She doesn't sit still for more than ten minutes at a time. She opens drawers she has left untouched for months or years, and looks and looks. I find her in the kitchen trying to spoon gravy from a pan, while holding a glass under the tap. It is as if her body is making a last effort to keep a grip on things.

She strolls through my study, for half an hour she walks from the living room to the hall to the dining room with my dictionary in her hands. Then she puts it on the window sill, trying to place it exactly parallel with the edge, and leaves it there.

I had imagined their old age differently. In twenty years or so they would be old, the roles would be reversed and it'd be us who looked after them. But their old age is suddenly on the doorstep, and won't go away. I smell it in their clothes, they no longer bother to change their underwear every day, I fear—a helper will have to come in. How would he be able to cope otherwise? She traipses round after him all day long. Even on the toilet he is scarcely alone. She clings to him. Everywhere and at every moment that one word she has left, Dad, rings out—ever more hoarsely.

Is this life then? I wonder aloud at breakfast. Yes, this is life, says Lieven. And we haven't seen the end of it yet.

In the intervals between writing—I work from the morning until about four in the afternoon—I am gradually preparing for another farewell: from my grandmother, my mother's mother. Her shoulder is not healing, after that fall she had a few months back. Increasingly she develops a high temperature, has problems with all kinds of infections and, mainly, mentally she has virtually "gone". She seems to have no sense of place or time, and when I last saw her she called me "Jozef", the name of her brother who was killed in the war. She said nothing else, apart from the mumbled rosaries she prays every waking hour. It would surprise me if she makes it to Easter.

If she dies, I shall have to support my father for a few days, as my mother won't be much help to him. She herself, to my relief, reacts calmly to developments. It will be a release, she said to me—strikingly lucidly and without faltering.