

# The Hidden Fabric

**Stefan Hertmans**

**An extract pp (8-21)**

**Original title** Het verborgen weefsel  
**Publisher** De Bezige Bij, 2008

**Translation** Dutch into English  
**Translator** Jeannette Ringold

© Stefan Hertmans/Jeannette Ringold/De Bezige Bij/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

---

**p 8-21**

## A Phantom of Hope

In the first quiet hours of the morning, in the whispering gray of wet snowflakes, Jelina pulled small boxwood plants from in between the rocks. The tenacious plants felt tender and young, the first signs of early spring. Their root system was right under the surface, like hairy fingers clutching pieces of stone. They let go of their prey reluctantly.

She plunged the young saplings into a bucket with cold water and then planted them in the border around the house. The whispering of wet snow around her intensified. Her hair got drenched. She was holding a shovel just when a cat jumped out of the old wine cellar. The fact that she felt a momentary impulse to kill the animal with a well-aimed blow – just like that, without any reason – made her heart pound.

In the afternoon she grated a small truffle on an omelet: small black bits of earth with an ancient, animal smell that disappears when you chew it.

In the evening, by the fire, she looks at a book of photos with all sorts of strange fetuses. Then she reads a few pages in a book about a New York architect. It bores her and she finishes a bottle of wine. Everything bores her at such a time.

While she listens to music, she remembers the prehistoric fish that her daughter had drawn several months before. At the time she had wanted to make a poem about it, but that didn't work out. Then too, she had been listening to this same music – it had been a Sunday afternoon in October. Light seemed to shine through her body as if it was made of clear water. Gregorio Allegri, *Miserere*. The ethereal voices calm her.

\*

Hans is asleep; in the mountain village the meltwater gurgles; the last ashes glow in the fireplace. The music seems to float into the room from another century. She feels an oppressive desire for nothing specific. She still has to go and walk in the last melting snow, up and down dark slopes, before she can go to sleep next to the breathing, comforting body that is waiting for her upstairs.

Late at night she wakes with a start, hears children's voices in the lower-lying streets of the village. She had a strange dream: she could float in time as if she was under water, and she floated through her childhood years. When she looks through the window at the west side, she sees the dark, threatening rock mass against the black sky. One of the children's voices screams down below, under the faint light of an old streetlamp. It reminds her of old movies.

\*

I'm having a difficult day, she writes in her journal, because my memories are painful. I come upon old photos that give me a view of what was lost, of words that have vanished, of something in me that has disappeared since that time. I try to read, but my thoughts wander; I turn on music, but I don't listen; I can't speak, so that the members of my family think that I have become ill or crazy; I see the face of a secret lover of long ago; my stomach is upset; I turn around and see the mirror, the empty circle around the pupils of my eyes; I yearn and keep quiet, as if I am guilty of my desire. Yet I want to see no one, speak with no one, touch no one; actually I barely want to feel myself; I am my own dreary illusion, and the hours pass with nothing but this nonsense.

Her computer breaks down while she is in the middle of a sentence. Right away she feels betrayed by life. She detests her own touchiness but sits wallowing in self-pity as if in a warm bath. Finally she smokes a cigarette, sitting near the open window, her legs on the windowsill; she brushes a lock of hair from her eyes, feels a vague pain in her midriff. There is nothing but peace and quiet around her, a house in the ordinary harmony of its daily fidelity to her, things neatly in their places chosen by her. But she ponders and plods, and she gets nowhere, so that in the evening she is worn out by nothing except – as she calls it – displacing air. Later, while she is busy in the kitchen, a sentence occurs to her; she realizes immediately that it's perfect and cherishes it while cleaning her vegetables. Then the telephone rings and she forgets the sentence – something she resents when she wakes up in the middle of the night.

\*

She loved the wavering, slightly off-key sounds of old vinyl records, their crackling and their imperfections, just as she loved windows that were not cleaned, Hans' slight squint, the foggy filter of memory, forgotten days and absentmindedness, and the small injuries that she suffered because she was elsewhere in her thoughts. She shrouded herself in silence for days on end, like a snake under a bundle of sticks, while she had the feeling that she could smell with her thoughts, hear with her fingers, and with her lips see things that she blew clean – because they were dusty – and held close to her unseeing eyes.

\*

She is exhausted by the ride back home from the mountain village. She is silent the whole time; Hans stares ahead; the child in the backseat is engrossed in a game. A long car ride makes her feel that everything in her life is unreal, a dream that is dreamed by someone else.

In her study, the next day, she reads in a book a defense of Lilith, the original pagan woman, against Christian Eve. The book claims that being created like Eve is tantamount to unrelieved boredom and that you have to learn to create yourself. "Creating yourself is the only alternative to self-destruction." She underlines the sentence with a fine pencil.

\*

She picks her child up from school. She waits among the other mothers until she sees the familiar little face appear. She strokes the little girl's hair and gets into the car silently. While backing out of the parking place she causes a fender bender, a scratch that she wants to settle amicably. But the driver of the other car gets excited, wants to involve the police, pulls out forms, and demands that an admission of guilt be signed. Her head is spinning as she looks at the small, fierce, spiteful face. She stares at the wrinkles around the woman's mouth; she signs the form. She is unable to utter a word and gets back into the car. She takes the child to a playground where she tries to continue reading her book, but she can't. She puts the book aside and calls to the child that climbs on her lap. So she sits and stares at a dark branch that is swaying back and forth above a barren field with empty coke cans while she mechanically strokes the hair of the child that knows that it shouldn't speak to her.

\*

She perceived the years when her child was growing up as if in a haze – domestic happiness is clouded by the way that it occupies people. The ordinary continuity of everyday life seems to carry her away from the serene core within herself. It makes her forget how to listen to that dark quiet space within her, the unbridgeable gap between her nagging thoughts and her own life. In itself that isn't bad; she certainly knows how empty and harsh she is at the bottom of her heart. But there is something much more disquieting about the daily contact with the bustle of domestic happiness: it makes her realize bit by bit that even there, in the embodiment of fulfillment itself, there is a hollow, an absence that expands. She has to admit with a certain disbelief and shock that this happiness resembles depression, also a situation in which you lose contact with yourself.

\*

Some people, she says, always have secret agendas. When they meet someone who doesn't seem to have one, they feel cheated and become angry. And you, asks Hans, by whom do you feel cheated? By myself, the way I exist in you, she says. Why do you actually love me?

\*

Her desire, as a child, was to sit in a place in the woods that no one else could reach (across a creek in dense brush, past a fence in an overgrown area, on a trail that was used only by animals). The desire that was at the source of everything that she wrote: to be able to be alone with something. But every area that she created would later be defiled by her readers' eyes, and she left it quickly to search elsewhere for solitude. Just because she sought peace, she drove herself ever further and would continually lapse into discontent.

\*

In praise of the hip, she says. I would like to write in praise of hips. About boring, reliable men's hips, for example. She smiles. The man across from her in the café now notices that she chews her cuticles, because of their very delicately frayed ends. "Are you eating yourself?" he asks, smiling. She'd like to hit him.

\*

Whimpering fear, on a perfectly still morning, because she doesn't know what to do with the day (because she doesn't want to write; because she doesn't believe that she can, and then doesn't believe that in turn).

\*

On the car radio she hears an Italian woman's voice. "Rituals are born from habits. From these rituals men make symbols that obstruct all of life. When they obstruct all of life so that all women become desperate, they call on the gods of melancholy. That is the moment when the gods leave mankind." Passionate accordion music, pierced by shrill shrieks and laughter. A crushed rodent lies at the side of the road – she went by too fast to see what it was.

\*

She was at a meeting, sitting at a long table with ten people. The expression of the man across from her struck her as a reproach – a reproach that was not consistent with what they both wanted in their innermost hearts: each other. No, they acted normally; they talked and gestured; they broached subjects, and everything took them further from that first look. But the radiance in their eyes did not mislead them: their glances – curious, almost shameless, then again reserved or even timid – continued to flash back and forth across the table. Their bodies already knew; it would be good together, for a moment, in a sunny room, preferably his – and after the moment of anonymous passion the affair would start, reproach and disillusionment would follow because nothing would resemble this game at its start. So, with their lives and loves as a tempting banality on their casually shrugging shoulders, they sat and practiced staring past each other during the discussion. But every few minutes their glances caught, crossed and flashed, and they felt the bite of teeth in a shoulder, the grasp of a hand on a neck, while someone in the meeting asked who wanted more coffee. He did, she didn't. And it made them gasp inaudibly with effort because the world was as it is.

\*

Memory: she was walking on a sandy path, strewn with rocks and pieces of weathered oak bark that were swarming with ants: she wore sturdy white sneakers that contrasted attractively with the tanned skin of her ankles; in the wide bottom of the valley she saw a small southern city in the late afternoon sun. Everything around her was so quiet for miles around, so intensely the repudiation of everything she thought and wanted, that she got the feeling that she could feel the indifferent slow movement of the planet (something like an enormous, faithful whale who rotates from day to night). She laughed, scoffing, but a little further on she tripped over a loose yellow rock; she twisted her ankle and cried out in pain.

\*

"I have to write new poems all the time because the old ones make my life unbearable." She copies it from the newspaper, looks at the photo of the old poet with his eternal cigarette, throws away the paper, then takes it back out of the wastebasket, feels like smoking, smoking until she feels dizzy and nauseated.

\*

She made a date after all with the man who sat across from her at the meeting. They have a drink on a terrace, and she keeps looking past his shoulder at her own reflection in the window of the sunlit café. He notices that she is fascinated by something behind him, absorbed by an image – that of her head next to his shoulder. I'm trying us out, she says, when he asks what she is looking at. I want to know how we will look in a year, but I see nothing.

\*

She can get angry very quickly, and then turn back inward equally fast. She can be tough, more rational than she herself wants to be, and then again make a detail into the center of the world so that she doubts everything. That is the moment when something inside her starts to tremble, unnoticeable and slight, absurd and reckless.

\*

During a luncheon at the home of friends she sits at the table with a distant acquaintance who was also invited and who detests her, to whom she has nothing to say, and with whom no good relationship would be possible. The host goes out of his way to foster a pleasant conversation; the food is outstanding, the wine carefully chosen, all sorts of things are discussed, all of world politics is considered so that nothing gets too personal. Much is at stake for the host because as a good humanist he can't live with the thought that among themselves his friends would not care at all about one another. The boredom is thick enough to cut with a knife; the goodwill seems almost sinister. She knows that this acquaintance watched her gestures with disapproval while she talked, just as she watched his, that they both considered the subjects of conversation secondary and these secondary considerations essential. Negative chemistry. She returns home with a migraine because of the wasted day, a too full stomach, and the consoling thought that she is made for solitude. In her journal she copies a sentence from an Austrian author: "If you don't move, death will perhaps not notice you."

\*

Her sensuous mouth which she sometimes considers a traitor because she doesn't want to appear vulnerable.

\*

Not get stuck in the illusion that a person's character can be changed; not want to yield to hope; safeguard against disillusionment by taking a slightly bemused attitude; an inability to be herself and because of that thought feel a very slight relief, replaced by a slight reluctance; look outside, simply burst out laughing, interrupted by a random memory, by something without rhyme or reason, and become fully absorbed in this coincidence, to be only this amalgam of scattered thoughts, a fragile, weightless moment of nothing, something that gets lost, just like the countless other moments of insight, in an ocean of absence.

\*

She can look at gray skies for weeks, at the movement of large masses of dark damp clouds from west to east, and wait for something like meaning and sense. She reproaches herself for longing, for not taking what is simply there. But it is exactly this absurd desire that makes her write again, sometimes hurriedly and guiltily because the child has to be picked up from school, and everything

that occupies her takes on a forbidden character. From the fourth floor study where she regularly sits and writes, she sees the large cranes in the harbor at the horizon. They look like threatening dinosaurs that have forgotten what they were supposed come and to tell mankind. Silently they stand, steel skeletons; they conspire with the indifferent sky above a restless world. The sounds that rise from the city seem animal-like, as if animals and engines have become one, a conspiracy against people. She turns on the television to escape her uneasiness; she sees images of young people being beaten up, well-fed and holding a banner; she can't read what is written on it; she turns off the television; the clouds and the cranes are still there.

\*

In the evening, when the child is asleep, she looks at the news again. As frequently happens, she experiences intense emotions that concern humanity in general instead of being carried way by individual fortunes or spectacular incidents. She finds it difficult to forgive herself for these feelings; she feels heartless because she chokes up at abstract thoughts and not at specific stories.

\*

It is early afternoon and the pipes of the central heating in the library gurgle softly. Fifty people sit around her and listen. No one at all should die at the end of a book, she says. The author should simply walk away in the middle of the characters' lives; she should benignly leave them to their mundane lot. Later, if need be, send your characters a postcard, a text message, a trifle as she says in her old-fashioned way, while her gray eyes light up with a mixture of mockery and warmth in a face that inspires confidence but shows no mercy for itself. A tall, elderly woman looks at her impassively. Suddenly she wants to hide in shame because of the profundities that she had uttered with such aplomb.

\*

*Le tango est une pensée triste qui se danse* – the tango is a sad thought that is danced. She wrote it on a coaster the day that she looked next to herself, past the man from the meeting, and a tango melody came from the café, and he, who had not understood her wistfulness at all, took it from her and copied it diligently as if he still had an opportunity to turn the chance that had brought them together into something meaningful.