

Light

By Gunnhild Øyehaug

Translated from the Norwegian by Kerri Pierce

Published in Words Without Border

## LIGHT

The day I saw a person disappear through the side of a moving bus, just glide smoothly through the side, I was very surprised. I'd gone into town to buy fresh meat for dinner. That day it was raining violently, rain poured down the bus window where I sat, thick runnels of rain, like someone pouring transparent paint from the bus roof, making it difficult to distinguish what we were passing—granite, yellow leaves on November trees, a tunnel mouth, street lamps, all of it flowing together. A small river that wasn't usually there flowed along the road, and the narrow stream that normally picked its cautious way down the far slope was now gushing from the street parallel to the main road, like all the water had entered a panicked state, rushing forward with all its pandemonic hydraulic force. The bus wasn't moving especially fast, but the windshield wipers raced back and forth, and it was as I shifted my gaze from the dissolving world outside the window back inside the bus itself that I saw a person get up from their seat, like any person wanting to exit the bus, take a couple of steps forward, and disappear through the side of the bus.

I got off four stops later and I turned around to see whether that same person could smoothly materialize out of the air wherever and keep on walking, but there was no one else at the stop except for me and two other passengers who had exited the bus with me and who left in the opposite direction. I was approaching the duck pond, which I saw had been filled up, what once had been a slope down to the pond was now just a mass of water into which the sidewalk smoothly transitioned. It sometimes happened with this kind of rain, sometimes the water would swallow the whole sidewalk, forcing all the children going to and from school to walk in the street for about twenty meters. At the moment a sliver of sidewalk remained, on the pond ducks navigated the thin, high reeds, they suddenly had a little lake in which to paddle. I wondered what it would be like to have the habitual boundaries of your life suddenly change like that, suddenly expand, just imagine, for example, if my house acquired another floor, I thought, or if the living room grew by three meters before returning to normal, would I think, how great, now I have three extra meters to try out, or would it just make me uneasy?

When I got home, I regretted not stopping at the school to pick up the kids, it was still a little early and I had planned on working. But I started to picture them tumbling into the duck pond, they'd be holding hands and one would slip and pull the other with them, and neither of them could swim. I paced anxiously through the house, going back and forth to the window, until finally I saw two rainsoaked figures coming up the hill, and when they entered the hall I had to hold them close just a little bit longer, to feel that they were here, the two of them, and that nothing had expanded into anything unknown, aside from the fact that I was mother to them both, perhaps. I thought about it again as I was cooking dinner and preparing to fry the meat, it wasn't something I tolerated well, the smell of raw meat and blood, It's a smell, I told my

husband as he sat slicing carrots at the kitchen table, that we're not meant to recognize. It's a concealed-by-the-body smell, nauseating. We all have it inside, of course, but it's not something we want to know anything about. My husband nodded. It reminded me, actually, of how a body writhing in birth smells. The smell that permeates the birthroom—flesh, blood, fat, amniotic fluid, it gushes out of you with the baby, everything you have inside, nothing you can do to hide it. You transcended your human boundaries. And what happened? You smelled. Everyone in the room had been enveloped by the smell of my body's interior, it was terrifying, and concise. The meat, sizzling now in the butter, had sealed itself again, had formed a fried crust, and that's how it is, I thought, with everything. Things open and they close again. Blood now bubbled from the meat as it fried, with relief I turned the piece over.

It was twelve days before Christmas. When the kids were in bed and my husband back at work, I walked around, tidying up and listening to a Gregorian choir sing Christmas songs. I lit a candle on the living room table; a Christmas star, perforated with a pattern meant to resemble snowflakes, hung in the window and cast a prickled shadow on the ceiling. I moved the rocking chair next to the table beneath the Christmas star, intending to sit there and read, perhaps. I had my back to the window and was arranging couch cushions when suddenly I heard a slight cough. It came from the rocking chair. I spun around, convinced that someone had teleported into the rocking chair, maybe from outside, maybe from another dimension, what did I know, and that person now sat in my rocking chair coughing. But the rocking chair was empty. I glanced mistrustfully at the Christmas star, as if it had something to do with that cough. But the Christmas star placidly continued to throw its prickly pattern on the ceiling. I took my book and sat on the couch instead, but something was off, I couldn't relax. When I turned toward the

window again, someone was sitting beside me on the couch. It was Alice. Alice told me she'd come from the Beyond to inform me that her brother had departed this life and come to her. Also, he'd told Alice everything I'd done to him once, I'd seduced and abandoned him. I hadn't understood the fact that he just wasn't the type you could treat like that. He was a sensitive guy with a complex nature, plus he was engaged, a fact I had known. That was a chaotic time in my life, I was twenty-five back then, I heard myself explaining to Alice, I wasn't myself, that was just how I behaved back then, he wasn't the only one, it was like I was trapped inside a big, diabolical clown that was somehow myself, I wanted to be loved and I wasn't, I said. Doesn't matter, Alice responded. I wish he weren't dead, I said. Wishes are balloons, Alice said, and death waits with a needle. I covered my face with both hands, I had expected this moment, I had expected my sins to catch up with me, I just hadn't thought it would be today. I looked up and Alice was gone. The Christmas star was still doing its thing, prickly pattern on the ceiling, etc. The rain, which had stopped while Alice was there, suddenly gushed down, a river ran next to the sidewalk, there was no one outside, the asphalt was wet and still, the street lamp continued to illuminate, but said nothing. What happened next was unbelievable: I walked through the wall like I'd never done anything else, like walking through walls was as easy as swimming, and it was, actually, the wall felt like another fluid element, just like I was a fluid element. And then I crossed the asphalt to the nearest street lamp, climbed to the light globe, and entered the lamp's interior. Why I did that I have no clue, but it had something to do with my need to illuminate, to just be a lamp, to light the way for others, to simply fill up with light, to perform one single function: light.

After a quarter hour's lighting it occurred to me that this wasn't right, I needed to go back inside to the kids, they couldn't be left alone at night, what had I been thinking? I tried to pass back through the wall, but it had closed. My expansive ability had obvious run its course. I ran around to the other side of the house and tried to open the door, but the door was locked, of course it was, I had locked it myself. But beneath the mat was the key I had set out for my husband. The kids were sleeping safely in their beds and hadn't noticed that their mother, for a few minutes at least, had transformed to a street lamp. And that's how it should be, I told myself when I stood brushing my teeth a little while later, and it seemed as if, with these brick-like words, I was intuiting something important about life, something that depressed me on the one hand and cheered me on the other, as if I'd discovered the card to play when I felt myself pressed into a corner, when life's peculiar ability to be both good and bad forced me to choose sides. I hoped future days would not be like this one and that my sudden expansive ability wasn't one I had acquired.

Dreamwriter

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Translated from the Norwegian by Kerri Pierce

Published in Words Without Borders

## DREAMWRITER

(Autobiography)

Hello, it's morning, I'm sitting at the kitchen table and have just read two versions of Draumkvedet (The Dream Ballad), except I keep getting distracted by the feeling of looking up through a tørrfiskstativ, a fish drying rack, set on a mountain. A tall fish drying rack, and my perspective is from the ground, from the dry, smooth rock face, and through the slats in the rack streams the thin sunlight, and this is what distracts me, the play of light and shadow between the drying fish. My grandmother worked with fish when she was thirteen, and she lived alone on an island with twenty fishermen, she slept in a bunk bed surrounded by twenty snoring men, no one could be more different than my grandmother and myself, my grandmother could beat anyone at armwrestling, could walk miles carrying a heavy milk pail, when she was a kid she used to beg to kill the rats dozing on the sunny barn steps, she told me how she'd beat them against the bathtub's edge, when she grew up and had a tub of her own, what a pleasure it was to get rid of pests, she was merciless, although it was also easy to make her laugh, I used to describe my

anxious mountain hikes, how scared I was of cows, of small dogs, of snakes and seagulls, just to make her laugh, and is it because a) Grandma worked with fish, and because b) Grandma told me some extremely visionary dreams, which I later used in a text, that now that I'm reading *Tørkestativet*, no, *Draumkvedet*, I get an inner picture of a fish drying rack? I don't know. *Draumkvedet* exists, like many other oral poems, in multiple versions. *Draumkvedet*, which in every version describes how Olav Åsteson or Åknesonen or Håkinson or Åkneson, how Olav, anyway, fell into a heavy sleep on Christmas Eve and didn't wake again for thirteen days; and how he in the course of those thirteen days dreamed about that which exists beyond time and space, namely the Realm of the Dead; and how men and women receive punishment or salvation based on their actions in life; for example, those who marry their cousin are now snakes biting each other by the tail, those who are kind to the poor, who give them grain, shoes, and so on, receive salvation; something Olav dashes to the church to report, either by sitting in the door, or standing, or marching down the aisle right in the middle of the sermon—the ballad appears, for instance, in an account recorded by Moltke Moe, a 52-line version, in the 1890s, and in M. B. Landstad's *Norske folkeviser* (Norwegian Folk Tales) from 1853. Landstad based his version on the song a woman named Maren Ramskeid sang for him, or rather, Landstad called her Maren Ramskeid after the farm from which she came, although her mother and father first took the name Heggveit, the location of the first farm they built, which they were subsequently forced to sell, after which they moved to Ramskeid, right next to Heggveit, and Maren, who lost her mother when she was a child, probably around 11 years old, while her father died when she was 17, moved in with her aunt, Hilleborg, who lived on Sandland in Brunkeberg, at which point she took the name Maren Olavsdotter Sandland, nonetheless Landstad called her Ramskeid. What happened with Maren Ramskeid later on: she married a widower and then traveled to America

where she died, no one knows exactly when. I have no idea what Maren looked like, but M. B. Landstad characterizes her to a certain extent when he describes how he heard *Draumkvedet* for the first time: “a poor crofter’s hut high up in a remote valley, with the autumn wind whipping against the window pains, an intolerable draft leaking through the floorboards, and in the midst of it, on the stump over by the hearth, the stunning singer herself met me. She retrieved with difficulty the half-forgotten verses from memory, and the voice that bore them was trembling and cracked. However, after her memory cleared and the mood gripped her, her voice warmed, and the lean, wrinkled cheeks began to glow.” I noted all this down as well as I could from a recording I heard on the net, and unlike Landstad, as he listened to the song streaming with increasing warmth from the so-called Maren Ramskeid, she with the lean cheeks, I could pause, something he could not do at all, and an original version of the verses that Landstad so hurriedly jotted down turns out to actually be full of errors, which is, of course, only to be expected when one is sitting in a drafty living room, while the wind whips the windowpanes, scribbling for dear life as a woman sings by the hearth on an autumn day in the mid-1800s. One did have windowpanes in the 1800s, in case anyone is curious, window glass came into use in the 1400s, first in churches, then in houses. In Scandinavia prior to that you just lived in a house without windows, with a coverable peephole and a roof vent. I have no idea what will remain after I’m gone, after I’ve crept down to where there is no vent. That’s something over which I have no control. But Maren Ramskeid, who had a life both before and after the meeting with M. B. Landstad in a glass-windowed hut, whose years stretched both before and after the moment she sang *Draumkvedet*—in which Olav Åsteson or, in her version, Olav Åknesonen, thinks it’s a real pain to walk the Gjallar Bridge, and sees both Jesus and Satan, or Grutte Gråskjegge—this Maren Ramskeid, whose date of death is unknown, has a memorial dedicated to her, not because



of her life, but because of those few minutes spent with M. B. Landstad, because of her song, a commemorative stone set up between Heggveit and Ramskeid in the county of Telemark. And this stone has a plaque which reads: “Maren Olavsdotter Ramskeid, born 30 June 1817, sang Draumkvedet for M. B. Landstad, about 1847.” Did she expect this to happen as she sat by the hearth struggling to retrieve, verse by verse, the song that she probably learned from her father, who probably learned it from his father as well? The hearth that, as it now turns out, wasn’t actually the hearth at which Maren Ramskeid sat, and I don’t even know if she sang next to a hearth at all, and whether she had lean cheeks even, because when I stopped to do a fact check between this sentence and the previous one, and listened again to the recording, I realized that I had, in true oral tradition fashion, misheard, it was not actually Maren Ramskeid who sat and sang her version, it was actually the famous storyteller Torbjørg Ripilen who sat singing at the aforementioned hearth, and not for M. B. Landstad, but for Moltke Moe, so how Maren Ramskeid looked is anyone’s guess, and she didn’t actually sit in a drafty living room singing at a hearth, the whole idea we were driving at with a potential Maren Ramskeid (based entirely on a mishearing) we must now discard, so what about the moment when she sang for M. B. Landstad? We don’t know, and just as we have no idea what that moment was like, so she probably had no idea at the time she was sitting (or standing) and singing that there would be a commemorative stone dedicated to that moment, but that everything else in her life would disappear into oblivion, even her death? To put it like Jan Hansen, who gave a speech about Maren Ramskeid at the commemorative stone’s unveiling in 2003: “America fever raged at that farm like at so many others during that time, and in the year of our Lord 1882, as they would say, Maren and Olav traveled ( . . . ) to America. We’ve tried to discover what happened, but we’ve turned up nothing. Not even by contacting people ‘over there’ has it proven successful to discover anything about

Maren Olavsdotter Ramskeid. We would've liked to find her last place of rest, but we've ended up with no result." Nonetheless, the stone commemorating the moment Maren sang a song stands. From time to time people gather around the commemorative stone, members of storytelling groups or folk music enthusiasts who know two or three versions of Draumkvedet. For them it's completely natural that the memorial stone exists, for them Maren Ramskeid is a unique concept, "Maren Ramskeid" is the most complete version, and which has the best structure, and which launches in without the minstrel strophe where the poet through meta-commentary affirms that he is present and about to sing about Olav Åsteson, as Moltke Moe, for example, does: "Listen to me, I'll sing to you / Of a man both young and strong / I'll sing of Olav Åsteson / Who slept a sleep so long," whereas Maren Ramskeid instead begins by remarking on the willow twig that Olav Åknesonen proved for his parents, Maren Ramskeid is a more powerful text, it approaches the uncomfortable visions more closely, but there is one thing Maren Ramskeid is lacking, thinks the woman standing to the far left in a photo taken in front of Maren Ramskeid's commemorative stone, this woman is standing and looking down at her shoes, she's wearing gray jeans and a cardigan and has a rather flat butt and flat hair, and a burgundy wool scarf with fringes, she thinks (although she doesn't say this aloud, since she is standing at Maren Ramskeid's commemorative stone) that Maren Ramskeid lacks the verse where Olav is thirsty and can't find water, because that's a verse that has haunted her for years, she's repeated it inwardly while preparing breakfast, while on the way to the bus, she's said it while looking at herself in the mirror brushing her teeth, it's popped into her head while she's stood in the lingerie store's fitting room beneath the glaring lights trying to find a bra that works, but her breasts are so flat, unaware that her stomach looked like that, it doesn't look that way at home, not like that, not like dimpled, bubbly fat beneath a layer of gray-white, uneven skin, in

stark contrast to the gleaming, smooth material in the bra color of nude, didn't want to say it, but it just came unbidden: høyrer vatn, å ser de inkji, unde jori so mune de fara ("to hear water, but not to see it / beneath the earth it must flow"), because that's her life, though why does she have that sense, of hearing water but not seeing it? And she thinks it sometimes when she's hiking in the mountains, which is what she likes best to do when it's October and the air is crystal clear and the leaves are still yellow and hanging from the birches, the forest floor smelling of soil and pine needles and moss, and she sees the tiny clear stream to the left of the gravel path, here I certainly see water, but then it came gushing, høyrer vatn, å ser de inkji, unde jori so mune de fara. The Norwegian author Dag Solstad wrote an essay entitled "Freud as a Writer," where he first more or less dismisses the Freudian dream interpretation, he relates, for example, how embarrassed he became as a young student when his landlady, a middle-aged woman, told him about a dream where she couldn't find her purse: "As the modern young person that I was, I knew good and well that a purse symbolized her vagina, and now she sat openly and unabashedly expressing anxiety about her sex life." In the essay's second half he explains the reason he, from a literary perspective, doesn't make much use of dreams. And the reason is this: "I halted them for literary purposes." That is what the woman standing next to Maren Ramskeid's memorial stone is thinking about, she read the essay before the storytelling group made its way up here, so that she would have something new and current to say when and if the subject of dreams came up, and whether the dream visions of Olav Åsteson (Åknesonen, Åkinson, Håkinson, etc.) stemmed from actual dreamed dreams or from oral vision poems taken from Catholic culture, that is, whether he had an actual dream, or a literary dream, and there was one thing in the essay that gave her particular pause, because Dag Solstad remarks that in eighteen novels he has only used four self-dreamed dreams, and he repeats the one that appears

in Irr! Grønt! (Patina! Green!) in the essay, and what's the subject, the subject is water, running water: "It ran through Vestfold, though the ground's split surface, in small channels, countless ones, almost or entirely hidden by narrow, wispy strands of grass, brushwood, and misshapen, elongated tree roots, deep in the earth they ran, some of them not even flowing, but just sitting, thick and brackish, others streaming, really streaming, merrily, some of them becoming city sewers and flowing beneath street systems and the basements of houses," and when it comes to the woman standing next to the stone dedicated to Maren Ramskeid, whose version of Draumkvedet doesn't include the water that Olav Å. could hear but not see, it is obvious that woman is thinking that Dag Solstad's dream must be a result of reading Draumkvedet, that is, that Dag Solstad, without being conscious of the fact, has fixated on water flowing beneath the ground, and if, the woman thinks, she were an airplane that crashed and someone located the little black box, that would be the sentence they found, to hear water, but not to see it . . .

When a few days later she's standing at home in her kitchen washing salad greens, she notices something dark on one salad leaf, and when she lifts the greens out of the salad bowl and empties the water, the dark speck has affixed itself to the bowl's transparent side, it's narrow and tiny, it's not a dirt clump, like she first thought, but resembles a miniature slug, she remains standing with the salad bowl in hand to see if the clump moves, and is therefore alive, and that it is, because after a few seconds two smaller clumps appear atop the other, and they extend, they must be antennae, she now sees that it must indeed be a slug, a baby version, or whatever it's called, she's filled with terror, she doesn't know what to do, the two small clumps on what must be the baby slug's head particularly fill her with disgust, she can't just toss it into the trash, the slug would just creep around the trash can and from there into the house, and she doesn't want to

stick the slug in salt, like she remembers a neighbor doing, salt desiccates a slug and kills it, she recalls something about cutting it in two, but it's too small to cut, it would probably slip between the scissor blades like a slimy little morsel and creep up one of the blades, the two virtually non-existent antennae testing the air and discovering that up here is safe, and then the slug will slug its way on up—she rips off a paper towel and uses it to imprison the slug, that is, she wipes it up, and she has to leave the house to toss the paper towel, and because she's partly paralyzed by terror, she tightens the fingers holding the baby slug, that's definitely killed it, she thinks, that's terrible, she can kill a baby slug, she wouldn't have thought herself capable, that wasn't her intent, and as if she's been burned, she drops the towel right outside the entrance. She hopes that the next time she goes out, she'll carefully lift the paper towel up, carefully smooth it out, and discover that it's empty.

Eye Blister

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Translated from the Norwegian by Kari Dickson

Published in Ploughshares

## EYE BLISTER

She has to get the asylum seeker back to the church. She found him wandering around in the woods behind the church, he'd had enough, he tried to tell her in a language she couldn't understand, but she knew that was what he was trying to say, all the same; he was pale, with big bags under his eyes, and his eyes were bloodshot. His hair, which was dark, lay pressed against his head in two big waves, as though he'd been walking back and forth in the church cellar with his hands clasped over his head, fingers locked. She couldn't believe her luck, that she, who never won anything, had had the good fortune to bump into the asylum seeker in the woods, when he was the very reason she had gone there and aimlessly pulled bark off some random trees in the pretence that she was collecting larch branches for an advent wreath, which was what she'd told Torstein, her husband, she was going to do, whereas in fact she just hoped to catch a glimpse of the asylum seeker in the church. He was, despite the strange hairdo, extremely attractive, masculine and desperate as he was right now. In fact, she had to admit he was generally incredibly attractive. Could that be the reason why she'd become so fascinated with his fate, after she'd read about him in the local paper, an interview with the asylum seeker who'd had his application turned down and therefore sought sanctuary in the church, and the photograph of a man sitting on one of the hard church pews, his tortured face framed by dark, curly hair, that just wouldn't leave her mind asleep or awake. Could that be why she constantly

found herself circling the church in the hope that she would see him in the cellar, where he slept on a mattress? No, surely not.

She has for a long time, before reading about the asylum seeker in the newspaper, been obsessed with Peeta Mellark in *The Hunger Games*; Peeta Mellark replaced Edward Cullen in *The Twilight Saga*, who had in turn taken over from Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*. She feels that she's finished with Aragorn and Edward Cullen, they no longer make her slip into a daydream, but Peeta Mellark, on the other hand, he's still kind of new, even though he's like the other men, in the sense that they're all good and intelligent and most importantly, incredibly kind - they are goodness incarnate - and she believes in them; even though they're only fictional characters, they seem real, in fact it's almost impossible to believe that Peeta Mellark doesn't exist. His fair hair, which is sweaty and damp at the neck as he sits up on the sand in the fictitious world of *The Hunger Games*, where they're being held captive in order to entertain the evil president and thrill-seeking population by killing each other until there's only one left: she wants to watch it again and again, it's as though his hair is everything she's longed for, all her life. She wants Peeta Mellark to exist. She freezes the shot where he looks up at his great love, Katniss Everdeen, who is the heroine and runs around in the forest with a bow and arrow and saves everyone, again and again she watches the moments when his feelings are so apparent on his face, especially the moments when he first looks away and then directly at Katniss, all his longing and all his hopes there just under the skin of his strong jaws, and his eyes that seem to say, can't you see me, here I am and I love you and will always love you. She looks for interviews with the actor on YouTube; fans have cut together Peeta Mellark moments like this, moments that make your stomach lurch, when Peeta turns, comes into a room, and sometimes

when she's at work in the bookshop, she goes to the toilet and finds one of these video mashups and watches it while she sits on the loo, or maybe she doesn't even sit, she just stands against the wall and watches it, and then flushes even though she hasn't peed. She's also watched all the interviews she can find with the actor who plays Peeta Mellark, but they're not as good. It's almost like Peeta's not there. And the interviews with him and the girl who plays Katniss Everdeen are equally disappointing, they're not in love at all in reality, they're just two young, chatty adults who have nothing to lose, no sisters to save, no worlds in danger of collapsing, and even though she sees that lots of fans have made videos where they've cut together moments from the countless interviews they've done together to find even the tiniest sign that they're maybe in love in real life too, she doesn't think so. She watches the films over and over again, when Torstein is out jogging, and if he catches her, he shakes his head in exasperation and says, Ellen, you're twenty-seven, those films are for teenagers, and she argues that they're films that can touch anyone, at any age, they have something important to say. And then Torstein takes away the bag of sour jelly sweets that she always likes to eat when she's watching films, and then he says: and you should stop eating sour sweets all the time, it's not good for you. And he's right. She gets little blisters in her mouth from them. Small, white blisters on her gums, which don't bulge out, but are more like small white tunnels in her gums, with a shiny membrane over the top, as though they're eating their way in. She sometimes dreams about them, she dreams that they appear elsewhere on her body, not just her mouth; for example, she dreams that she's in a shop and is about to pay, she takes the money out of her purse and reaches over the counter, then she notices her hands, the skin is perfectly normal, perhaps a little suntanned, but there's a small, white, shiny spot on her hand, a gum blister, and then she sees one on the other hand as



well. But every time she gets these blisters, she thinks, I can put up with it, because it reminds her that she saw Peeta Mellark the day before.

The asylum seeker has almost replaced Peeta Mellark, she's thought about him more and more, read the interview over and over again, studied the photograph. And he's actually here, right where she lives, in the church. She's wondered how he survives in the church cellar, she shudders when she thinks of the church cellar, where they used to go for their confirmation classes, where she sat and basically felt like a hypocrite, and her hypocrisy felt solid, not just a vague feeling, but real hypocrisy, as filling and real as an almond slice, she knelt down, she bowed down to the others, it would be too embarrassing to be the only one who didn't get confirmed; she could remember the smell of the plaster, she could feel the green, worn woven fabric on the chairs in the church cellar against her hands when she imagined sitting down to have a cup of tea with him, she could feel the varnished wooden table against her arms, she can hear the sound of the metal mechanism they use to lock the tables together in rows clink when he bumps the table with his thigh as he sits down, with a cup of tea, and looks up at her, and is beautiful and dark and in love, with her, and his intense eyes, in all the chaos and mystery of his life, whereas she, where she sits opposite him, represents freedom. The feeling is so strong, when she thinks about it, she's almost moved to tears, the feeling of understanding and the desire to protect and save is so intense, she feels like she's part of some kind of cosmos, when she thinks about the asylum seeker, she feels she is the ground on which he can walk, she feels that *she*, where she is sitting or will be sitting, on the other side of the table in the church cellar, is the place where the church cellar ends, outside, she is the point where the world starts, she is the asphalt on the path, she is the grass that leads down to the river that swings round the church, and

then she is the river, and then she is the ditch on the other side of the river, and then she is the wall and then the road, and then she is the whole world beyond that. She is the air, the light, all the sounds from everywhere. She is freedom. That is what she is. In relation to him, an asylum seeker who has taken refuge in a church, trapped in all the churchiness, with the woven tapestries on the walls, the knotted tapestries with biblical motifs, with the photographs of everyone who has been confirmed here from the 1940s to the present day, rows and rows of grave confirmation faces along the corridor, and perhaps his only daily contact is with the vergger, the sexton and the minister. She's tried to imagine it, and she's shuddered every time. Not because they're nasty in any way, they're just churchy. She's always felt uncomfortable with anything churchy, and this was only reinforced by the confirmation classes precisely because she felt such a hypocrite. But sometimes, like when they were singing Christmas carols in church, she got a kind of fizzy feeling when she saw how high the roof was and the space felt so open and mystic at the same time, and the burning candles and the picture of Jesus with the nails through his hands and feet, and she felt gratitude, and because she had such a developed sense of empathy, she could almost say that she sometimes felt the nails in her hands, a few times, just a faint tickling in the middle of her palms, a kind of suction pulling inwards, but she mustn't think about it too much, she often had to clasp her hands to avoid thinking about it, because then she would remember that awful time during the confirmation course, at one of the services they had to attend: suddenly she started to cry, and her classmates who were sitting there reading the magazines that they'd hidden inside the Bible, wondered what was wrong, and she'd said that she could feel the nails through her palms, and at the time she really could feel it, it hurt, and there had been a great kerfuffle, they'd had to usher her out, she was nearly hysterical, and no one believed her and to this very day she doesn't know why she did it, some people said it was because they had just

learnt about Francis of Assisi, the first person to experience stigmata, and that she'd thought about it too much, the fact that you could experience someone else's pain so intensely that blood appeared in the very places that the nails had been hammered in, that she'd imagined that she had also experienced it. Stigmata. She'd overheard one of her teachers saying to another teacher that she had a very vivid imagination, a little too vivid perhaps, and what about that short story she'd written that they had discussed in the staffroom which could indicate that she was struggling with mental health issues, about the girl who was kidnapped and then actually *killed*, it could be that everything had just tipped over for her in the church, she wasn't exactly easy and didn't really fit in, and they'd been worried about her, they'd noticed she was always on her own in the breaks and then she wrote the story about the girl who was *killed*, perhaps all the crying in the church had been a way of getting attention, and she heard the other teacher, who was a woman, say that it was certainly a method you could use if you wanted to seem *special* and get *sympathy*, then Ellen turned and walked the other way, so she wouldn't hear any more, but she had felt it, the nails in the palms of her hands, she was convinced of that, at least; but what had made her cry and get hysterical, that was still a mystery to her. At times she's thought it was just because she'd seen herself and the situation from the outside, that somehow it changed from being just a vague feeling, sucking inwards from the palm of her hand, and a few tears, to the class's reaction, one of the girls in the class who she really wanted to be friends with, but realised that she didn't want it back - just one look from her over the top of the Bible that was hiding her magazine, one look at the tears on her cheeks, a look that said EVERYTHING THAT WE ARE AND YOU'RE NOT, that made her feel naked, that made her just click, that made her weep buckets, and what had been painful was now actually painful, in her hands, her chest, but, she thought, all the same, that the pain in her hands wasn't a real feeling, the thing with her hands, it definitely wasn't

stigmata, it *was* an imagined, empathic feeling, and it wasn't smart. She felt tainted by it for a long time after; *that's the girl who thought she felt Jesus's nails through her hands.*

She read up on Francis of Assisi. She had a children's book about him, where he was drawn in a brown monk's robe, with a ring of hair around his head, which was bald on top. He wore sandals and was standing talking to some birds, and his face was ever so gentle. She didn't like the illustrations, she had never liked the book, she didn't like his tonsure, she didn't like his too gentle face, it made her impatient, when she'd read it as a child, it always made her think of smelly feet, eggs that had been boiled for too long and were green, of pants that were too small, of having wet knees, but Francis of Assisi cared for others, he stood by the sick and especially the lepers who no one else wanted to help, no one can deny him that, not even his hairdo. She read it again, and sat in the library and read about him in the encyclopaedia; Francis of Assisi, she said out loud in the religion class, which set her classmates giggling, was she really going to do this, a year later, had she really chosen Francis of Assisi as her subject for Christianity? Francis of Assisi was the son of a merchant, she said, Francesco, or Francis, as he was called, was one of the many children born to Pietro Bernardone, a rich textile merchant, and his wife Pica (she'd forgotten to change the encyclopaedia's words into her own here, in which case she would have said, Pica, his wife), who came from an aristocratic Italian family living in Provence. He was originally christened Giovanni, she said, as she surveyed the classroom and all the faces that were now in ninth grade with her, and that were staring at her, aghast, but fit to burst, when were they going to be able to laugh, out loud, when was it going to come? But, she said, his father changed it to Francis. Francis was not particularly interested in school. As a youth, he led a very high-spirited life and was rebellious. He was, above all, interested in the modern art of the

troubadour, troubadour! someone shouted from over by the window, Jesus, what's that, you know we don't use words like that in here, the teacher said, ok, fine, I won't use the word troubadour again, the boy by the window said, and everyone laughed; be quiet and listen to Ellen, the teacher said, well, he was interested in the art of the troubadour, Ellen repeated, and to be honest, partied a lot, much to the annoyance of the rest of the town. But then he fought in a war that ended in defeat for Assisi, and Francis spent a whole year in a miserable prison cell in Perugia and when he was freed he was very ill and nearly died, Ellen read from her papers. Being in that cell nearly killed him. And this, she said, is where you can find the first seeds, but very few of those who have studied or written about Francis of Assisi have given it much thought, she said. Because it was after his imprisonment in this miserable cell that he had his great conversion, his epiphany, if you like. In 1215, he visited a very poor church and listened to a sermon. The priest didn't have the means to buy food, or to put oil in the lamps or to maintain the church. In the semidarkness, Francis knelt down by the altar, Ellen said, with an old Byzantine crucifix, (she didn't know what Byzantine meant, so read it slowly and loudly to make it sound like she did), and he started to pray. And it was then that he heard Christ speaking to him from the crucifix he was holding in his hands, telling him to rebuild God's crumbling house. And so he did. But the point is, everyone knows that if you hear someone talking to you from a crucifix, then you're at most semi-conscious. You're dreaming, she said. If, Ellen continued, you had experienced the extreme physical and mental strain that being locked in a miserable cell for a long time must entail, then I'm sure you wouldn't react if a crucifix suddenly started talking to you. In other words, it's an illusion, the imagined voice in the crucifix. His conversion was therefore based on an illusion. She avoided looking at the teacher when she said this, she just kept her eyes on her classmates, who now looked like they didn't know how to react, and were

staring at the teacher. And then the whole thing became farcical, she said, when he later experienced the stigmata, for which he is so famous, she said, and felt the blood vessel on her neck pulsing, as you know, Francis of Assisi was the first person to experience stigmata, on the fourteenth of September 1224, to be precise, but I haven't managed to find out at exactly what time, but he is said to have been stigmatised on Mount La Verna, and he had the wounds for the rest of his life, which was only another two years anyway. The problem is that the story of his stigmata doesn't appear in the oldest accounts of his life, and nor was it mentioned when Pope Gregor IX canonized Francis in 1228. Ellen had no idea what she was talking about now and hoped that she wouldn't get any questions, she just hoped that her conclusion would make them forget the detail: Thus there is much to indicate, she said, that the pope was sceptical of the stigmata story, which had never happened before in history, and even though there have been several occurrences since, this has, if you ask me, also been the result a vivid imagination. But the point is that the pope, who at first didn't believe it and didn't include him in the list of saints, was later convinced in a dream. And then somehow it became true, when the pope put his faith in it. But he only understood it in a dream. That's how it was in the old days. People received things in dreams, had a so-called vision and took it for the god given truth. Thus we can conclude: nothing of what we believe we know about St Francis of Assisi and the mystery regarding stigmata, is true. The truth is that he was a good, kind man who kissed the hands of lepers and all that, which is enough in itself, really. Thank you, she said, and went back to her place. And just then the door burst open and Torstein, a boy from the parallel class who she had noticed because he had almost white hair, shouted: Fire! And there was in fact a fire, or that's to say, while she had been talking about why everything we knew about Francis of Assisi was probably based on a dream and why Francis' own religious epiphany was based on the brain's way of dealing with

intense physical and mental strain, in other words by imagining things, a fuse had blown in the plug for the fridge in the canteen, resulting in huge amounts of smoke on the ground floor and so everyone had to evacuate. But Ellen had stayed sitting in her place while all the others piled out, and possibly because Torstein felt in some way responsible for getting people out, because he was the one who had come to warn them, he stood there waiting until everyone had left, and when he saw Ellen sitting at her desk staring into thin air, as though she had frozen, as though she thought she could just sit through the fire, he ran over to her, pulled her up, opened the window and pushed her out, then jumped out himself. The fire was quickly extinguished, there was not really much more than smoke, and Torstein and Ellen got married five years later when they were twenty-one, they felt they were connected in some way, which apparently often happens when people are caught in an emergency situation, and now she works in the bookshop and he works in the fish farming industry. Torstein has never been told that he burst in at the moment she had bowed to the class and tried to disassociate herself from the very thing she believed in most in life, namely imagination, in order to fit in, to prove that she was over and done with the nails in her hands, and now they live an ordinary life, a very ordinary life, and Torstein is happy and thinks it will soon be time to have children, in fact it has been for a while now, he's often thought to himself while he's out running, on his usual running days, that it's now high time to have children, he loves her; sometimes he sees her like she was that day at school when he almost lifted her from her desk and threw her out of the window, how distant she was, how beautiful she was, how utterly herself she was sitting there in the midst of all the confusion, as if for the first time he saw someone who was both alone and unique, whereas Ellen has, for a long time, perhaps all her life, lived in the semidarkness or half-light of day of someone who always dreams of something else.

And now she's actually here, in the woods outside the church, with the asylum seeker. He's almost frightening close up. It's obvious that he's desperate. He shouldn't be out here, it could be catastrophic. She balls her hands and holds them out in front of her, then clasps one wrist with the other hand to symbolise handcuffs, as she looks up at him with an expression that's meant to say "don't you realise, you'll get caught if you're outside the church", and points down to the church, so he'll understand. With synchronised zigzag movements she draws a Christmas tree with her hands and then wiggles her index finger back and forth, as far as she can remember they haven't declared a Christmas amnesty this year, as they have in the past, when asylum seekers who have sought refuge in a church can walk around outside the church without any danger of being detained. She makes the handcuff movement again. Then she thinks that maybe it seems like she's trying to say that she understands, that he feels chained to the church, she decides to change tactic, she puts her hand on her chest and says her name: ELLEN. It's so strange, she doesn't hear her name when she says it, it's like she's saying E-EN at the back of her throat, it's rather alarming, *why*, she tries again, to articulate with her mouth and tongue E L L E N, now her name sounds thin and reedy, she can't say her name, she gives up. And then she points at him, generously, now you have to say your name, as though he were a child, but he just looks at her furiously, spits on the ground, there is something ferocious about his face, and she thinks his hair is so striking, the two black wings of hair, and oddly they remind her of the way she couldn't say her name, she doesn't understand. She points tentatively to the church and takes a few steps towards it. He falls to his knees on the moss, you'll get wet, she says, but she doesn't think he understands what she's saying. She tries to remember his name, but she's never managed to read it correctly, it's so long. She can see quite clearly the newspaper article about him and can



picture his long name, it starts with A, she tries and tries to read it, but it evades her every time. She gets down on her knees beside him. She feels it so strongly: that she loves him, that this figure kneeling on the wet moss in a wood by a church in Norway, this is all hers, or it's *significant*, it's as though the woods are humming all around them, as though something is going to happen, she gets the feeling that she can control it, she can control the wind, and the soughing in the trees, and that he will look up at her now, and he does, he looks up at her, he does what Peeta Mellark does, almost in slow motion, first he looks away and then he looks up into her eyes, and their faces are so close and then he leans in towards her, she knows that he's going to kiss her now, but instead with a swift movement he pinches the eyelid of his right eye and pulls it out so the eyeball is visible, and on the bloodshot eyeball she sees a small white spot, whiter than the eyeball, and she immediately knows what it is, it's a blister, it's a gum blister, the unexpected gum blister on his eyeball seems to dig deeper and deeper into her consciousness, and that's because she's dreaming, until she sinks into something white, unbelievable, shiny. She wakes up, she realises that she's sitting on the sofa, Torstein is standing over her looking at her strangely, huh, he says, that's odd, I'm sure I heard you say your name in your sleep, you said e-en, twice, he laughs, he's eating a hotdog with fried onion, do you want one, he asks.

Snow

By Gunnhild Øyehaug

*Translation © Kari Dickson 2018*

From the short story collection

**DRAUMESKRIVAR / DIRT**

Published by KOLON FORLAG 2016

To be published in Common Knowledge, 2019

## SNOW

The blow hit her on the right jaw. It was so hard that her mouth started to bleed. The blood fell on the snow. Red drops on white. I almost couldn't believe it, it was almost harder to believe that there were drops of blood on the snow than that I'd hit her. I'd never done it before. Not like that. It had been snowing for five days, the kind of snow that sticks to the branches, makes everything white, muffles everything, snow that makes you afraid, it was too much, there might be avalanches, the roof might cave in, etc., all the pointless worries one has when one lives in place with a lot of snow. What's more, we lived in a house at the foot of the mountain, any further up and the risk of avalanches would be too great. Even here it was questionable, but the people who built the house in the sixties had been given permission to build. They might not have been allowed to today, but we took a gamble that everything would be fine when we stood

there ten years ago and were so happy that we'd found THE HOUSE. No one had been taken by an avalanche yet, and it was now 2015. I had just come home from a book tour in the USA, my work was taking off over there, and I had been away from the house, from my wife, from the kids, had lived in my own world of publishers and events in small bookshops. Then I came back here and discovered that the house was about to be snowed under. She said it had been snowing for five days. I had jetlag, and I had to go up onto the roof to clear the snow. It made me angry. Why couldn't she have gone up there herself? She was a feminist, after all. When I'd been clearing snow for two hours, I had to take a break, get something to eat; I collected the post, which included a letter from the tax office. I was going to be audited. I called and asked what they thought was missing. I had failed to report 1.5 million kroner, they said. I rang my wife, who kept my accounts. WHAT THE FUCK! I shouted down the phone. YOU BETTER BLOODY WELL BE ABLE TO PROVE WHERE THAT 1.5 MILLION HAS GONE, OR I'LL END UP IN PRISON, FOR FUCK'S SAKE! She said she would come home straightaway. When she got home and was going to drive up to the garage, she couldn't get up the slope, it was too icy. The wheels spun round and round. I stood there and felt that I hated her. The failure in everything she did. It must have been that, and the jetlag, and the audit, and the fact that she'd been out yesterday and didn't come home until half past one and let me get up with the kids, me, who had jetlag, because she said it was the least I could do, she'd been alone with them for two weeks, so now she was going to have time off, it must have been all of that, I don't know, I just felt a sudden rage and I started to laugh at her, laughed at the hopeless spinning, her desperate face behind the wheel, she saw me, saw that I was standing there laughing at her, and stopped the car, got out with a furious expression, then slapped me in the face with the palm of her hand, and my fist just flew up of its own accord, right into her jaw and the drops of blood fell onto the

snow. We probably heard a noise that could have warned us, but it was swallowed by our roaring rage: seconds later everything was white and suffocating. The avalanche was unprecedented, they said later, the biggest avalanche in the history of the area, the house was smashed to smithereens and we were swallowed by the white chaos. They dug us out too late, but when I think about it now, I'm not sure I would have liked to know how things would be for us in the future.

Best wishes from me,

Seventh circle, outer ring.

P.S.

Do you still get spring out there? Write! I'd be so glad to get a letter.

Earth

By Gunnhild Øyehaug

*Translation © Kari Dickson 2018*

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## EARTH

Dear Diary

Today I read a book written by a woman again. I don't understand, all the books the newspaper has sent me recently have been by women. I've reviewed thirteen books in a row that have been written by women. The book I read today was one of the better ones, but it wasn't THAT good – the whole time I was reading I had the feeling I was being conned into thinking that it was better than it was. That it was just an illusion, that the sentences *appeared* to be fantastic, but they *were* actually *not* fantastic. As though the author was just COPYING fantastic sentences, and thus was

not capable of creating such sentences herself. This gave rise to an interesting paradox: how can something *appear* to be fantastic, but not actually be fantastic? That had to be the ultimate forgery. I was almost beside myself with rage, scorn and exasperation at the fact that she could thus *appear* to be a brilliant, without actually being so.

The author's portrait reinforced this impression; she had a particularly *friendly* face – and somehow I can't get this, *friendliness*, to tally with brilliance. No one can. I feel pretty certain I'm right when I look at her smooth, smiling face, and when I read that she's worked as a librarian. If they'd been a little smarter, the publishers would have chosen another picture not this one, which inevitably makes one think of disgusting nose pores, greasy shiny skin, the overall silhouette of the librarian, as though she was something one might use to stuff old furniture, a padded stuffing, terylene, foam rubber, with rounded contours.

Dear Diary

I've started to feel that books by women are not real books. That their sentences are not real sentences. When I look at a book and see that it's written by a woman, a kind of reluctance immediately creeps over me, a kind of YET ANOTHER WOMAN TRYING TO BE A WRITER feeling. YET ANOTHER FEMALE COPYCAT. YET ANOTHER PATHETIC COW WHO BELIEVES SHE'S UNDERSTOOD SOMETHING IN LIFE AND THINKS SHE HAS TO WRITE ABOUT HER MICROSCOPIC UNDERSTANDING.

Dear Diary

Today I saw how to make snow on TV. All you need to do is take boiling water and throw it up in the air. The meeting of the boiling water and ice-cold air means that the water freezes immediately in a small flurry of snow. It made me think of women. THAT'S WHAT WOMEN ARE LIKE, I thought. Women are a fluffy and colourless small shower, you could barely see the snow, which was the result of throwing up of the water, that fell so silently to the ground.

Dear Diary

I think it's the feminine, per se, that I've got a problem with. I feel agitated if I just see a woman. I feel that she's false and unreliable, and I turn away in contempt and disgust. Today in the supermarket, I stood behind a very ordinary woman who was putting her shopping on the conveyer belt. I would guess she was around forty, and kept bending down to the basket to take things out one by one, then putting them on the belt, and she had a pretty full basket. Why didn't she just put the basket at the end of the conveyer belt so she didn't have to keep bending down? And to make matters worse, she also had a runny nose and had to sniff every time she straightened her back and put something on the belt. I stood there and felt my anger clawing at my temples, and it was all I could to stop myself tearing the basket from her hands and slamming it down on the conveyer belt and stuffing a hankie up her nose. In my mind, I then let loose on

her, beating her up while I shouted FUCKING CUNT! I managed to control the urge by looking over at the newspapers. A female writer grinned at me from above the *Dagbladet* logo.

Dear Diary

I remember once my mum was going to cut my toenails. I must have been seven or eight years old - she squatted down on the bathroom floor and cut my toenails, which had grown so long that they were pressing against my shoes. I had my hand on her head to keep my balance. The feeling of her thin hair under my hand suddenly repulsed me, made me feel sick, her head was so warm. I pulled back my hand and tried to keep my balance as best I could without holding on to anything. I think it was then and there that my abhorrence of the feminine started. The fact that she was lower than me, crouching down, her thin hair, that she scooped up my toe nails, my waste, and threw them in the toilet afterwards, it all gave me the feeling that I was excused from something, that I was above her, that I had control. But when I smelt my hand later, it smelt of her scalp.

Dear Diary



Today I grabbed hold of a woman on the street who was annoying me with the way she walked. I shouted something incomprehensible at her, I can't remember exactly what it was, it's as though words vanish when I get like that, but it felt great to do it, it was as though I found a channel for all the pent-up aggression towards women that has built up in me, that churns inside me, that has been churning around for so long now that I sometimes think it might be a danger to myself and others if I can't find a channel for it. It was good then to release all that aggression today, by screaming.

Dear Diary

Today I got a text message from a woman I've been following around recently, saying she was going to report me to the police if I didn't stop following her. I don't know what it is, but it seems like my disgust for women has turned completely and become a kind of fanatical worship of women, not as intellectuals or writers (because I still can't read women writers without laughing with derision), but for the feminine. A bit like when you're a child and are utterly fascinated by your own poo. You can imagine sculpting with your own poo, your mouth starts water when you smell your fingers that have been up your bum. That's what it's like with me and women now.

Dear Diary

I had a peculiar dream last night. It was me and a rabbit. A big, fluffy rabbit that kept jumping away from me no matter how much I tried to catch it, and we were running through an open, desolate landscape. Today I thought I saw the rabbit behind the neighbour's rubbish bin, when I went down with the rubbish, and just as I was about throw the bag in the bin, I saw the same rabbit from my dream, big and furry, sitting behind the neighbour's bin, and it looked at me, and I saw that it had dark, sinister slanting female eyes that blinked at me flirtatiously, before it jumped off.

Dear Diary

Bought fishcakes for supper. I looked at the cashier when I gave her the money and noticed that she had the same slanting eyes as the rabbit in my dream. I turned back several times as I left the shop to see if she was looking at me, but she just sat there and scanned the goods, one after the other, so I had to go back to the till to have another look, and then she glanced up at me briefly, and I saw it: slanting eyes, dark, secret, deep, strange, almost unreal.

Dear Diary

Something very strange has happened. I was running after the rabbit in a forest (and imagined that it was the cashier from the shop), but it disappeared and I tripped and fell. The moss was so soft, I had to stroke it. Suddenly one of my fingers went straight down into the earth. It was damp

and cold around my finger, like my finger was in an earth vagina, urgh, what a horrible image. But that was it. Because inside the vagina I felt the tip of my finger push against something. A stone, I thought at first, or the root of a tree, but then my whole hand sank down through the earth, and all my fingers could fumble over whatever it was that was down there; something uneven, smooth, a bit slimy, it felt like intestines squashed into the shape of a walnut. I dug it out and saw that it was a brain. A terrible thought struck me: what if it was my own brain? I put my other hand up to feel my skull as though in slow motion just to check, and true enough: my brain was not there, all that was there was an empty skull.

Follow my reasoning: I felt my way to my own brain through an *earth vagina*; the symbolism could not have been clearer. *I am actually a woman*. My brain is behind my vagina. In short, what I am thinking is this: I am undermining myself. All this resistance to women stems from the fact that I am a woman and I refuse to recognise it.

In short, I am struck by the following insight: that I am most probably dreaming. Ergo, I am not a woman.

And now I am waiting to wake up. Many hours have passed. I no longer know what is real. Is this reality after all? Am I a woman? When will I wake from this dream, and when will it become clear to me who I actually am? These are the questions I am left with.

