

Constance Ørbeck-Nilssen & Ana Ventura

The Thoughts Make No Sound

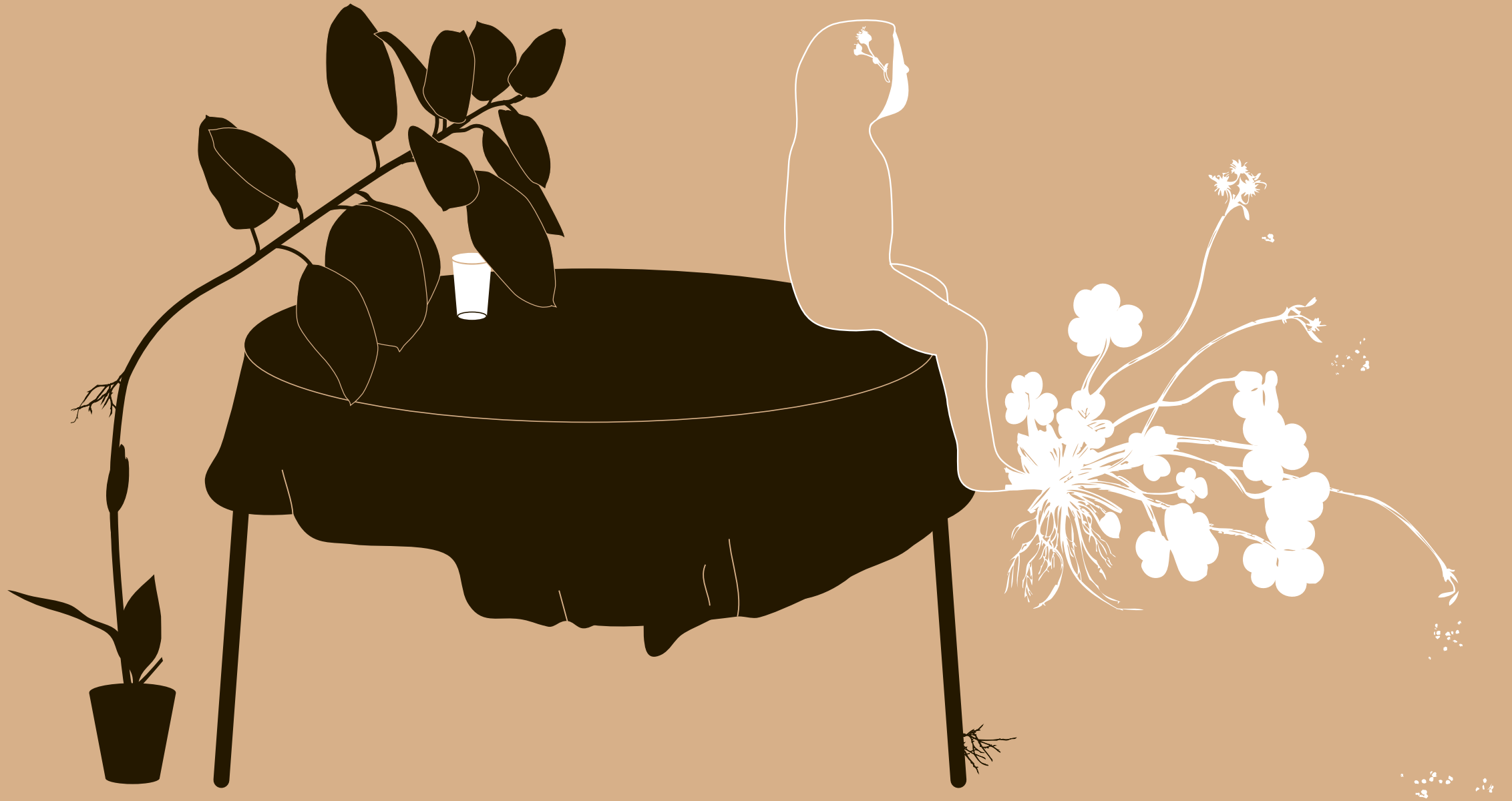


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If she comes now, Shi must hide it. She mustn't see it. Will only ask what it means. Say it's nice and like that. That she's good at drawing. Even very good. But she'll say that only so that Shi will say something.

Shi's eyes follow her. Knows all the time where she is. Now she stops at Ludvig's desk. Stands there looking. Says nothing. He doesn't say anything either. Shi holds her breath looking at Ludvig. The head is bowed, his neck making a soft arch over his desk, his hands covering his cheeks. They are all red. Saying everything Ludvig cannot say. That he's waiting. As long as he's waiting, Shi is safe. As long as he's waiting, nobody will ask Shi how she is. Shi knows what she's going to say. What she always says. Still, Shi too waits. The whole class is waiting.

What if she says something she has never said before, something everybody is longing for.

Children too. Children most of all. What makes it good to be small. Good to breath. Like that. Easy. Floating on happiness. Surely, nobody would be waiting if there was nothing to wait for.

Now she is drawing her breath. Then she says it.

Shi doesn't want to say anything. Not about what she is drawing either. What it is. She's just drawing. Like everybody else in the class. The teacher cannot know what it is, unless Shi tells her. All she can do is believe she sees what it is. Or who it is. That she can. Just as she believes she knows Shi or can read her thoughts. But nobody can read the minds of others. Nobody can do that.

Shi's mother cannot either. She doesn't know what Shi's thinking. At least, not in the night, when she calls Shi. That's what she's doing all the time. Calling loudly. Sometimes when Shi 's finally gone to sleep, she yells.

– Shi!

Mom has no place for Shi's thoughts. She has no place for Shi either. Occasionally, maybe. But mostly not. When she's tired, there is no place. She has so much else to think about than the things Shi is taken up with.

Mom won't read for Shi. She's too tired. Shi finds a book sitting under the light and reads a little herself. It could be a book about a grandmother and a little girl, that is if such a book exists. That they would sit together and talk about many things. That would have been great. Shi can see it in her mind's eye that they are sitting together. But when she lifts up the book, there is no grandmother or little girl inside, just some letters that become small words when she puts them next to each other.

They are easy to read. Father, mother, cat, night, hat. It's dad who has the hat on his head and mom who strokes the cat. There's a girl there also. She is holding her dad's hand. For it is night outside. Shi reads until she knows all the words by heart. Then the teacher believes that mom has helped Shi, and that everything is fine.

She reads at other times as well. While she lies waiting. But not when mama calls for her. Then she puts the book aside and comes right away. Shi doesn't sleep much. Maybe a little now and then. She has to be there when mama calls. She cannot manage all alone. After papa disappeared. When the house became all quiet, she couldn't manage anything at all.

Shi reads while she's waiting. Waiting for mama. Sitting at the kitchen table waiting. Lying in bed waiting. Lying under the little lamp that hangs over the bed. Shi knows how to wait. Can hear when she has to get up to help mama. What if she falls down in the bathroom. Hits her head against wash basin or the bathtub. That doesn't do. That's how it is. That's why Shi has to watch over her.

Shi takes care of herself. She takes care of mama too. Takes care of Ludvig. Takes in the teacher. Following her with her eyes. Waiting for what she's going to say.

– What's this supposed to be?

Shi can see Ludvig shrinking. As if he was shriveling up. His head, his shoulders, his back and hands. All of him sinking into the chair, against the desk, against the floor. As if everything is drained out of him. Until there is nothing left in there.



Is it possible that everything can just disappear, thought Shi. Can you come back from that? Is the voice gone as well? What about your thought?. Is there a complete void inside? White or black? Is there emptiness, black?

Mama is standing in the bathroom trying to find the toothpaste. Holding on to the wash basin with one hand and searching with the other. She cannot manage it. Shi has said that she must hold on with both hands.

– My child, says mama and is about to fall.

Then she starts crying.

Shi knows where the toothpaste is. The toothbrush as well. She stands on a stool and opens the cupboard and finds all she needs. Mama cannot find anything. Holds on to the wash basin with both hands while Shi is brushing her teeth. Mama is swaying, dribbling and crying, clearing her throat and spitting. Letting go with one hand to straighten her hair over her forehead, eyes and cheek. Leaning towards the mirror. Searching for her face. Cannot find it. Cannot see anybody in there. Not Shi. Not mama. Just grey shadows.

– No, oh no! mama sighs.

Shi picks up the brush and wants to straighten mama's hair. Steadies herself by putting one hand on her shoulder. Just lightly. So that she doesn't fall off the stool. In the mirror her hair looks good. Shi clasps the brush which glides through mama's red hair. Long, careful strokes. Shi finds a clasp and gathers her hair and moves it away from her forehead, eyes and her cheek. Mama closes her eyes and hums a melody..

– Shi has a red dress, mama has red hair, says Shi.

It's in the middle of the night. She holds the brush up and smiles to mama.

– Good, say the eyes of the girl in the mirror.

But Mama doesn't see it. Living far inside herself. Behind her eyes. Doesn't come out.

–Your turn,' says the little mouth in the mirror.

Mama glides away from the mirror.

– Shi stays, mama goes, says Shi, but mama's not listening.

Shi plays a special game. Sometimes. Like just now. In the mirror. Finding words she can move about as she wants. Where she needs to be. A place with windows that flap in the wind and doors that you cannot knock on, stairs that creak and voices that laugh. Just a game. In the middle of the night. Pawns in a game. Mama's turn. Shi's turn. It's Shi who plays.

– What would I do without you? says mama.

She bends down and tries to take her shoes off. Shi bends down and takes her shoes off.

– Hold on mama!, Shi says.

Mama is leaning against her back. It supports her. It supports mama. Shi too. Every night it supports her. Also during the day. At school. During the lessons and outside. When the others run about and jump and sing, Shi stands there pretending that she's running, jumping and singing as well.

Shi helps mama across the high threshold, across the living-room floor and into the bedroom. Mama is stumbling and crying and says she is terribly tired. As soon as she has had some sleep, she'll be better. Shi is like mama's extra leg, that extra arm that holds everything up. She supports mama over to the bed so that she can sit down until things are straightened out. Shi finds her nightgown under the duvet and helps her off with the clothes. Sometimes she will go to sleep before Shi has finished undressing her. Going into herself and disappearing behind large sounds and deep sighs.

Only Shi in the house. In the large darkness. She places places the duvet nicely over mama so she won't be cold. What if she became ill? Then she would need help all the time. During the day too when Shi is at school. Then it wouldn't work. Shi leaves the bedroom door open and tip-toes across the cold floors, through the living-room, past the bathroom and the kitchen. Creeps into bed, pulls her cold feet up against her body. Warming herself. Under the light she goes to sleep just before she has to get up.



Her bag is ready. Her clothes as well. Piled on the chair. Otherwise things wouldn't work. Then it would stop the wheels she needs to keep everything going around. The hours, days and all the nights. She sees to it that no one notices that the wheels have actually stopped. Because time goes on anyway. Or keeps coming. Like now. Now. Comes and passes on. Is replaced by another now. The trick is not to get left behind.

– We must stick together you and I, says mama.

She is sitting in her nightdress drinking a cup of black coffee and says that now she needs a real cuddle. Mama pulls Shi up on her lap and strokes and pats her head and says that Shi is the only person in the world that can help her.

– What would have become of me if you were not here, mama sighs.

Her mouth smells. Her body smells too. There is none of the mama smell any more. Shi holds her breath. Would rather like to avoid the strokes and the pats. She slides down from mama's lap and asks if she wants food.

– Food, food, answers mamma.

Shi goes to the fridge. There is only some butter and a twisted tube of mayo.

Mama's eyes look past the fridge, past Shi, past the coffee machine and the empty bread bin, and rest on the wine bottle. Mama asks Shi to get it for her.

Then Shi's back gives a sudden jerk. Not much, just a little, enough for her to feel like something pricking or burning. So that she has to bend forward and hold on to the counter with one hand. Her heart is beating. She can hear it in her ears, inside her head. Maybe mama can hear it as well, because she straightens up in the chair and tries to clear her voice.

– What's wrong? she says.

Shi doesn't answer. Has to hold on. So that mama doesn't see how scared she is. She stands still till it's over. But it's never completely over, just enough for her to be able to stretch out an arm and hand the wine to mama. So that mama doesn't

understand that it's Shi who is in need of help. That it's she who is little and that mama ought to help her. But mama cannot manage that. Shi knows.

Nobody is waiting any more. In a hurry, Shi continues to draw on her sheet of paper. Until she comes. Till it's her turn. When she has to say something. To her. She draws, erases and colours. Erases until there a whole in the paper. The palms of her small hands are wet. Her cheeks are burning while the air is heavy with the smell of eraser.

Shi lifts the scissors and cuts into the white sheet. Just as if they are inside the paper. Only Shi and the sheet of paper know about it. And the scissors. As if they are calling out to her that they want out. That she has to find them quickly. Then things will be like it used to be. When papa was there. Before mama started yelling loudly

Maybe they would travel. Shi doesn't know where. But there are many places they could go. A place by the sea. Dig her feet into the sand, so they disappear into the warm, soft sand, while her hair is lifted like the waves. Up and down. Smooth and curled. Over her face over her eyes and cheeks. So that the ocean disappears and the birds and the beach and her feet and papa and mama. Until they appear again.

Shi likes bathing. It's almost the thing she likes the best. And best of all is when she can ride on papa's back while he swims far, far out. All the way out to where Shi doesn't dare to be left by herself. All the way out to where you cannot see the bottom even if you swim deep below the surface of the water. So far that she can barely see mama standing back on the beach waving to them. So far. They can. Go to the beach. Imagine that they can. Even if papa is not here. Imagine if they could.



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