

LBRIS

We know
books

Study for Obedience

Sarah Bernstein

GRANTA

Contents

1. A beginning a beginning again 1
2. A problem of inheritance 17
3. A dying tongue 49
4. On community farming 87
5. A private ritual 113
6. The occasion of a brother 139
7. A meditation on silence 171

1

A BEGINNING A BEGINNING AGAIN

It was the year the sow eradicated her piglets. It was a swift and menacing time. One of the local dogs was having a phantom pregnancy. Things were leaving one place and showing up in another. It was springtime when I arrived in the country, an east wind blowing, an uncanny wind as it turned out. Certain things began to arise. The pigs came later though not much, and even if I had only recently arrived, had no livestock-caretaking

responsibilities, had only been in to look, safely on one side of the electric fence, I knew they were right to hold me responsible. But all that as I said came later.

Where to begin. I can it is true shed light on my actions only, and even then it is a weak and intermittent one. I was the youngest child, the youngest of many – more than I care to remember – whom I tended from my earliest infancy, before, indeed, I had the power of speech myself and although my motor skills were by then scarcely developed, these, my many siblings, were put in my charge. I attended to their every desire, smoothed away the slightest discomfort with perfect obedience, with the highest degree of devotion, so that over time their desires became mine, so that I came to anticipate wants not yet articulated, perhaps not even yet imagined, providing my siblings with the greatest possible succour, filling them up only so they could demand more, always more, demands to which I acceded with alacrity and discreet haste, ministering the complex curative draughts prescribed to them by various doctors, serving their meals and snacks, their cigarettes and aperitifs, their nightcaps and bedside glasses of milk. Of

our parents I will say nothing, not yet, no. I continued to spend the long years since childhood cultivating solitude, pursuing silence to its ever-receding horizon, a pursuit that demanded a particular quality of attention, a self-forgetfulness on my part that would enable me to bring to bear the most painstaking, the most careful consideration to the other, to treat the other as the worthiest object of contemplation. In this process, I would become reduced, diminished, ultimately I would become clarified, even cease to exist. I would be good. I would be all that had ever been asked of me.

Better perhaps to begin again.

There was the house, standing at the end of a long dirt track and in a stand of trees, on a hill above a small, sparsely inhabited town. A creek marked the property boundary to one side, and at night the sound of its fretful flow came through my bedroom window. Looking down the long drive, one could see dense forest, a small town deep in the valley, and beyond, the mountains, higher than any I had seen before. The plot of land and the house which sat upon it belonged to my brother, my eldest brother. Why he ended up in this remote northern country, the country, it transpired, of our family's ancestors, an obscure though reviled people who had been dogged across borders and put into pits, had doubtless to do, at least in part, with his sense of history, oriented as

it was towards progress, turned towards the future, ever in search of efficiencies. From a practical point of view – and pragmatism was naturally of the utmost importance to my brother – he was also engaged in some perfectly reasonable, if slightly perverse, business dealings, for he was, or at least had been, a businessman involved in the successful selling and trading, importing and exporting, of a variety of goods and services, the specifics of which to this day remain a mystery to me.

I came to stay in the house upon his request and initially for a period of six months, leaving the country of our birth for this cold and faraway place where my brother had made his life, had at any rate made his money, of which there was, as I would come to see with my very own eyes, a great deal. I saw no reason to object – I had always wanted to live in the countryside, had often driven through the rural areas surrounding my natal city in the autumn to see the leaves in colour, to experience the fresh air, so different from the turgid air downtown, well known to be the primary cause of the high rates of infant mortality, not that I had children myself, no, no, nevertheless, the air quality and its

deleterious effects on public health were of concern to me as much as they might have been to any other ordinary citizen. Moreover, as my brother pointed out, it was not as though I had any specific obligations or ties that could not be broken with ease. I allowed this. Here is how it was. I had so to speak thrown in the towel. My contemporaries had long surpassed me, had, whether by treachery or superior skill, secured their places in life and in their chosen professions. It was said that it was a terrible thing to realise a lifelong dream, and yet still I wondered why they could not let blood a bit. They bloated with success. There was so much time and nothing to be done. I had only a little bit of will. I was not in on the great joke. For a time I pursued a career as a journalist but eventually left the news agency at which I had been employed, not even in disgrace, my time there had run its course, there was nothing at all to mark my going. My efforts over the years to obtain a continuous contract of employment had been in vain, the process had been explained to me as a bureaucratic and not at all a personal one, and yet when I responded in kind, that is to say by invoking the usual bureaucratic processes and

fully within my rights making a request according to the general data protection regulation guidelines under the suspicion something fishy was going on, the application was treated as a personal affront and it was made clear to me that I was not helping myself. In truth, I never had helped myself. I left quietly. No one was sorry to see me go. The job I held just prior to my departure to my brother's home, in the country of our forebears, and which I would continue remotely from the same was as an audio typist for a legal firm, a job at which I excelled, typing quickly and accurately, knowing my work. Nevertheless, I sensed I was unwelcome in the office, which was lined with the usual legal appurtenances, binders and diplomas, leather and wood. I knew that my halting displays of personhood, my miserable insistence on continuing to appear in the office day after day, could only be disheartening to the jurists and paralegals whose voices I typed into a word processor swiftly, precisely, with devotion and even with love, and so they received my leaving announcement with unconcealed joy, throwing a farewell party in my honour, staging a kind of feast and donating lavish gifts. It did not take long for me to set

my affairs in order, a matter of weeks, three months at the outside, and, the journey having passed without incident, here I was. The country air would be good for me, I felt, and the seclusion, when my brother did not need me I might take advantage of the various woodland paths maintained by local voluntary groups. I would be quiet.

At the time of my arrival, my brother was not yet ailing. Truly he was in the very pink of health, the prime of his life; having recently freed himself from his wife and teenage children and their perennial demands, he was, he said, at last free to pursue his business ventures in peace. His investments had begun to pay off and, in the absence of his family, from whom he had, it transpired, long felt estranged, and since he spent a great deal of time away from his home, he found himself needing someone to look after the house, he told me one afternoon over the telephone. And who better than I, who from childhood had proven myself the most efficient, most doting manager of my siblings' household affairs? When I did not respond immediately, he assured me that the house, although storied and ancient, although once belonging to the distinguished leaders of

the historic crusade against our forebears, nevertheless had all the modern conveniences. These he enumerated, as though he were the agent of some new, dubious hotel: high-speed Internet, a variety of on-demand streaming services, a soaking tub, a rainfall shower, a memory foam mattress, hand-woven linens, a convection oven, a six-slice toaster, an ice machine, and so on and so forth. As my brother's claims about the furnishings of his home proceeded by this logic of declension, it occurred to me as it had perhaps occurred to him that he knew very little about me and, what's more, that this concerned him, the idea that he no longer knew what might please me. For instance, as he said the word 'mattress', his voice became suddenly panicked, as if he feared he had made the most irremediable blunder, that this mention of the mattress would be unacceptable, perhaps even offensive, to me. I was troubled by this sign of discontinuity in my brother's total authority, it was clear to me that the business with his wife must have come as a blow to him, what little I knew of men suggested that they were constitutionally incapable of being alone, terrified of not being admired, and seemed to regard ageing and its