

LBRIS

We know
books

REPETITION

A novel
by
Vigdis Hjorth

Translated by Charlotte Barslund



VERSO

London • New York

It was late November, it was dark in the morning when I woke up and it would be dark again by four o'clock in the afternoon, and if I were to step outside the place where I was, a small cabin deep in Nordmarka, a large, forested area surrounding Norway's capital, I wouldn't be able to see my own hand in front of me.

I usually retreated to this simple cabin after busy periods of activities such as events and literary festivals, in order to rest, to read, to catch up on sleep and to dream. I had travelled the length and breadth of the country that autumn talking about the relationship between the novel and real life, a theme that had accompanied me all the years I had written fiction and which I was used to discussing, but I had started to feel increasingly lost and subdued. I would often stay silent and during the last event I wondered if I was losing my mind.

I'd spent a week in the cabin and had been hoping to stay there for longer in order to read, to catch up on sleep and to dream, but the University of Oslo Symphony Orchestra was giving its annual carol concert and I had promised a friend, who plays the viola, to go. Besides, I had just read that repetition is the whole point of life, that repetition is the daily bread of life, its blessing fills you up, and seeing as I had attended the orchestra's carol

concert for three years in a row, I hoped that it would indeed prove to be a blessing. I made preparations to leave the following morning and so ended up taking the dog for a walk later than usual, in the early twilight. We walked through the forest to the unlit road we normally follow up to the point where we can see stretches of the long Steinsfjord below us. The cabins we passed were locked down, it was outside the season, but even so I rarely saw other people there; in some of the old cabins on the ridge behind me, I had never seen any lights at all.

We had turned to head back when darkness fell, first gradually, then suddenly, I couldn't even see my own hand when I held it up to my face. My dog, however, carried on undaunted, she had a flashing LED light on her collar and if it hadn't been for that, I might well have ended up crawling along the verge between the road and the forest. So I followed her and because I couldn't see anything, my sense of hearing was heightened, I believe, by the rhythm of her paws against the road, her steady breathing and the faint susurration of the wind in the tall pines. After three quarters of an hour or so, she turned into what must be the path to the cabin; I had switched off the lights before we left and it lay in a darkness that humbled you. I followed her with some hesitation so as not to trip over any stones and roots, and when she finally stopped, I was able to make out the doorstep in the red light from her collar and I sat down on it. There was no moonlight, no stars, it was as dark as underground, we breathed darkness, the dog's senses attuned to the forest, mine were listening to my thoughts where something was stirring, rising from the deep, but it slipped away before I could grasp it, like a night-time dream dissolves when you try to

recall it while at the same time the sensation of the dream will linger in your body as if it were a physical experience, this was one of anxiety and gloom. I unlocked the door to let us in and we went to bed, but I couldn't sleep, I tossed and turned all night until I dozed off in the early-morning hours and dreamed I was a young girl and I noticed that I had a big gash in my side, a cut that could have been made by a knife or a pair of scissors, and I thought that I ought to clean it with antiseptic, I showed it to my mother and asked if she had any antiseptic. She didn't seem interested, but she would check, she said, and left, but she didn't come back, she must have forgotten. Then I spotted an arrow on the ground, I picked it up and it turned out to be a pen. I woke up with a pounding heart because this dream was a variation on a recurring theme and also a warning. I got up and took the dog for a walk, I didn't know what else to do, I walked for a long time in the grey, wet fog with a feeling of suffering from unrequited love, but without an object for my restless longing.

I packed my things and tidied up and when we drove down the steep hills from Ringkollen to Klekken, it started to snow. Large snowflakes twirled slowly in front of my windscreen and headlights and made it hard to see and driving on the unlit, narrow, winding road demanded my full attention; soon the world would be dazzling, white and glittering, and anything sharp and pointy would be smoothed over. It was something that happened every year at this time, it recurred, and repetition is the whole point of life. Hope is like a new garment – stiff, tight and glittering – but until you try it on, you won't know if it fits or suits you, while memory is like an old garment: no matter how pretty it is, it no longer suits

you, you've outgrown it. Repetition, however, is like a durable garment that hugs you tenderly, but never constricts or swamps you. I was glad that I hoped for nothing, but why then this feeling of dread?

It was dark again when I reached Sandvika because no snow had fallen here as it had on higher ground. I took the exit east to Oslo rather than west to Kristiansand and Nesøya as I usually did, joined the main road and became a part of the heavy Sunday-afternoon traffic crawling with agonising slowness towards the city centre, at long last I was able to park underneath the concert hall and I walked through windy, Sunday-empty streets towards the main entrance, past glum figures wrapped up in heavy parkas and dark scarves, bracing themselves against the icy wind. As I approached the hall I saw several people waiting on the steps outside, the doors were not yet open so we had to wait and waiting is a challenge, especially in the cold, I hoped the time would pass quickly. We hope time will pass quickly. We have but one single life on this earth, a split second of earthly existence in the endless expanse of time, and yet we don't feel that it can pass quickly enough. Yes, I get it. It is hard to live your life in a way that matches that knowledge, perhaps it is impossible. I positioned myself so that no one could see my face, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and told myself that all was well, I could sense the presence of my irritating, mortal fellow human beings, their breathing and the sounds they made when they moved, when they tried to keep warm by rubbing their arms, shifting their weight from one foot to another, how they moved up the steps as more people arrived, the queue compacted and it grew more crowded around the entrance,

their impatience and their fears. There are no people anywhere else, only here on our little planet; there may well be plenty of intelligent life out there, but there are no people, not in any of the billions of galaxies, we are a rare and threatened species, and so wicked towards one another. I heard a metallic click, I opened my eyes and saw the heavy doors glide open before I entered as one of the first.

The instruments were set out on the stage; I took a seat where I could see the viola, in the third row to the left, the same seat where I had sat the year before, another repetition. The audience surged in, but spoke quietly just like last year, this space commanded solemnity. We began to warm up, some people took off their coats, there were couples and pensioners, families with young children, an adult daughter with an old mother, an adult son with his parents and so on, I alone was on my own. Young children climbed onto their parents' laps, it made me emotional, I never went to a concert as a child, it wasn't in my blood, how might my life have turned out if I had been to a concert as a child and it had been in my blood? Then perhaps what happened next wouldn't have brought back the memory. There were empty seats to my right, a man stopped, behind him was a woman, behind her a girl aged fifteen or sixteen, their daughter, I thought, the invisible bonds vibrated. The man tapped the daughter's shoulder and pointed to the seats, she nodded and went to sit next to me, her mother followed, then her father, there was just enough room for them, they were so close that I could feel the girl's padded jacket against my arm, she wasn't happy. I couldn't insulate myself against her unhappy presence, she didn't want to be there, she had been forced to come,

squeezed in between her mother and a strange woman, she stared at the programme while her mother looked at her with disapproval because she wasn't happy, because she wasn't grateful, her mother exchanged knowing glances with the father, no matter what they did, the girl wasn't happy, she refused to be happy, she stared at the programme in mute protest. At six o'clock the doors were closed, the lights dimmed, the musicians entered, I waved to the viola player, the hum in the auditorium died down. The conductor took a bow, everything was silence and anticipation, the hands of the girl next to me with her eyes on the programme trembled as did mine, the conductor turned to the orchestra, raised the baton and the music began.

Carols from northern Norway, *Blessed be the day over the fjords, Blessed be the light over the land*, the girl's mother wriggled out of her coat, pulled off the Burberry check scarf around her neck, folded it on her lap and patted it with restless hands, she didn't want to be there either, she was there for the girl's sake, but the girl wasn't grateful. The father had bought expensive tickets so the family could have a nice time together before Christmas, but the girl wasn't happy. *God's peace upon the mountain and hill, God's peace upon the beasts in the stall*. The mother leaned towards the girl and whispered: Take off your jacket, she pinched her through it, bowed down to her ear, elbowed her, whispered more loudly: Take off your jacket. The girl closed her eyes, her mother hissed her name, my name, a hard sound, but the girl didn't want to take off her jacket, she was hiding inside it and that was why her mother wanted her to take it off, draw her out from her hiding place, her shelter, *We are unyielding, just like*

you, *You bless with eternal words*, *The people who live here in the north*, we clapped, the girl didn't. Her mother glanced at the father who shook his head. *O holy night*, I was mesmerised. The mother tugged at the girl's jacket, harder this time, now closer to her, intruding on her personal space, why was that jacket so important? Because it had turned into a battle which the mother had to win. The girl unzipped the jacket, her mother yanked at a sleeve, her parents paid the bills, they paid for her keep although it couldn't cost them much given how thin she was, but they had paid for her jacket and could make demands, and no one else, the friends I hoped she had, was there, she was forced to be alone with her parents and for their benefit at the University Symphony Orchestra's carol concert so that her parents could exercise their power and feel reassured. Something had happened, something terrible had happened the week before which had to be fixed, which had to be mended, her parents needed it to be. The mother's threatening gaze and a sudden gesture from the father that signalled: Take off that damn jacket! The girl slowly peeled the padded jacket off her left shoulder with her right hand, her elbow came near my elbow, she eased the jacket over her right shoulder using her left hand, but she didn't pull her arms out of the sleeves and the jacket wound up stretched across her back, half off half on, like a weird straitjacket. She bowed her head towards the programme and closed her eyes, I could see that she was crying. She was trapped and paralysed and she couldn't stay where she was without breaking, but neither did she have anywhere to go or anyone to turn to, she was fifteen or sixteen years old and dependent. I wanted to put my arm around her and whisper in her ear that everything would be alright, but I couldn't know that, it

probably wouldn't be, it didn't look like it, and nothing I could say would take away her pain, *Lovely is the earth*. I could do nothing for her and even if I could, it wouldn't have made any difference because the people she longed to be understood by, the ones on whom her anxious hope was pinned, were her parents. *Generations will follow the course of generations*, and we are tied to our family from our first breath to our last, and the last carol had been played and we clapped and stood up and the girl pulled her jacket back over her shoulders and they walked out in front of me, three lost, unhappy people, hopelessly entangled. Concert-goers pushed and shoved impatiently from all sides because life couldn't happen fast enough and I lost sight of them in the crowd. The musicians had gone backstage, but I didn't join them to say hello to the viola player, instead I stepped out into the cold and the dark while the girl continued to prey on my mind and I didn't go to the island where my house is as I had planned, but drove back to the woods because Grøndals vei had returned to me, my last November in the first-floor flat in Grøndals vei came back, the place where I had spent my formative years, so to speak, a lower-middle-class area on the lower side of Tåsenveien. On the upper side of the mighty Tåsenveien were smart villas with large gardens while on the lower side were smaller houses with smaller gardens and several terraced houses and below them again the housing blocks for workers from the nail factory. On my first day of school we were asked to draw the place where we lived; later I wondered if that was because our drawings would tell our teacher a great deal about each child's socio-cultural background, as I guess you would call it today.

November 1975. I was sixteen years old and my mother worried about me. It had started a few years earlier, when I turned fourteen and got my period, my mum started to worry about me. It worsened when I turned fifteen, when I developed breasts, mum became even more worried about me and her fears mushroomed with every week, with every month. She worried that I might start smoking, drinking, sleeping around, go off the rails, go to the dogs, and her anxiety was contagious, she must have spotted something in me that meant I really was at risk of going off the rails, of going to the dogs, indeed I was starting to believe it myself. She worried that I would succumb to teenage temptations, deadly drugs from America, she feared that I might become addicted to them, sleep around and get pregnant and bring shame upon myself. I wondered if she suspected some kind of darkness in me and she made me suspect it too. She watched me like a hawk for signs of the beginning of the end, soon I was doing the same and that was how I learned anxious self-reflection. She would stand by the kitchen window waiting for me when I came home from school, when I came back from my friend Unni's or from athletics practice; I would approach the house and see her in the window and my heart would sink and I dreaded it, but I had nowhere else to go, through the gate, through the entrance door, up the stairs to the first-floor flat

where she would be waiting. I could visit my friends Unni or Helle, but ultimately I had no choice but to go home and then, which was worse, the interrogation would begin – sooner when I had been with Unni or Helle than when I had been to athletics practice, because I might be lying about my absence and I might really have been elsewhere, with someone else, with boys, how could she ever be sure? Was there something I wasn't telling her? What was it? What was it? She would come up close to see if she could smell smoke or something else, while I could smell her fear, that unique smell of fear, and I grew scared of whatever it was in me that terrified her desperate, darting eyes so much. Whatever I said was wrong, it merely sowed doubt and more anxiety, it didn't calm her, it didn't reassure her, her fear was too great. She suffered from a terrible anxiety created by her own fear and she couldn't rationalise or cope with it and then she would get angry with the person who triggered her unmanageable emotions, while at the same time she could not remove the cause, me. There was a frantic quality to her which I didn't understand, but which I had to deal with day after day, week after week, I had to explain and defend myself and I tried to quell her fears and the rage her fears produced, which was directed at me, but I failed, no matter what I said it only made things worse: *You just don't understand, it breaks my heart!* My teenage years revolved around my mother's breaking heart.