

Against Art

(THE NOTEBOOKS)

TOMAS ESPEDAL

TRANSLATED BY JAMES ANDERSON



LONDON NEW YORK CALCUTTA

Seagull Books, 2011

Imot Kunsten: notatbøkene

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To my mother

The message that is announced

that the **APRIL** message

message is

**To remain: this is something
that also needs courage.**

Kristian Lundberg

My first name was made in a factory, cast in metal, and had a certain permanence. I have tried to forget it. I'm forty-three—forty-four—forty-five—forty-six years old. I write this in September. I was born on 12 November in the sign of Scorpio. I've been told that when a scorpion is threatened, when it's cornered and can't escape, it raises its sting and forces it between the two carapaces that protect its body; the poison is pumped in. Spring, autumn is the season I like most of all, the summer is past, I can begin working, November, September, the ninth or the nineteenth, the twenty-ninth; I start writing in the morning or in the evening. The house is quiet. I'm not frightened or

backed into a corner, I raise my right hand and place the pencil point on the paper, the poison is pumped out. I write. That first sentence, like pressing a needle to the skin, a slight resistance, soft and the needle enters, it passes through and finds the artery; it is necessary to forget. My other name was more difficult, softer, harder, a woman's name. It took me a long time to destroy it. Not because it was invincible, but because it was old, it was linked to a place; I've never been there.

I was born in a city, the name comes from the outskirts, a dry, wind-blown and unyielding name, it snapped like some stubborn tree. That first sentence must be as hard as steel. You work it up, hone and polish, chip and refine, a piece of craftsmanship. The mechanical clatter of the typewriter, like sitting alone in a factory hearing the voices of people who aren't there; idle hands and heavy boots that tramp across the floor without making a sound. The sentence gleams. Hard as steel. My daughter and I have something in common, we both lost our mothers. I lost my mother in April, she lost her mother in September. I didn't know what to say, how I could comfort her, all I managed to say, the first thing I said, as if I were a

child, as if no years could separate us, as if I wanted her to console me and for us to embrace one another in a common grief, two soulmates, of the same age, as if I in the course of a few wordless minutes had turned her into an adult, my future partner in life, my hope; she heard it and turned away, angry and afraid, it was no solace, the first thing I said was: We have no mother.

My daughter is fifteen and doesn't know her father. He's a man who writes books, you might say, and quite a different man from her father. I've tried my best, after she lost her mother, to be a good father to her. I also tried to be a sort of mother, it was a big mistake which I plunged into with all my energy and a steadfast will; I stopped writing, stopped travelling, terminated some friendships and installed myself in our new home like a mother. I seldom left the house. Stayed at home, washed and tidied, constantly cleaned the rooms and the sheets and her clothes. I cooked dinner and breakfast and made up the lunchbox she took with her to school. Always regular meals. Always clean clothes. Always someone at home, morning and evening. I enjoyed it a lot, more than I would have believed; I loved going shopping and making food,

tidying, washing clothes, hanging them out to dry, it did me good. But my child wasn't happy, she missed not only her mother but also her father. One day she said: Why are you always at home? Why can't you leave me in peace, alone for one day, on my own, why can't you get out of the house?

I went into town.

Reluctantly I went into town, what did I want there?

I walked the streets and whiled the time away, two, three, four hours and then I went home. I wanted to be at home with my daughter. She needed a father and she'd got a grief-stricken man, who thought he'd lose his reason, go mad, who thought he would die, become ill, who thought he'd lose everything, his house, his child, he was convinced something terrible would happen. He was waiting for it, but the terrible thing didn't happen, not in our household. Our neighbour suffered a massive heart attack and collapsed outside his house. The nest in the tree in the garden was attacked by a bird of prey which pulled it out of the tree and cracked open the eggs, ate the young and flew away. Terrible things were happening, all the time,

everywhere, except in our house. Our house was sacred, a peace lay over it. And in this peace, in this waiting time I began to write. Each morning, after my daughter had left for school, I sat down at my writing table. A dull, white silence enveloped the house. It frightened me, I wasn't used to the silence, I'd washed and swept it away while I'd waited for the terrible thing, but now that the silence was here, it came as a sudden and unexpected joy. The silence took up residence in the house, and after a few weeks it had become part of me too, it had entered what I was writing.

Like snow. A white, dull snow after a long summer and a warm autumn. Wind, rain and suddenly snow, the first snow. The crows hop across the garden from left to right making words in the snow; small, black scribblings, messily written, the birds are writing, so quickly and precisely, they're writing: Winter is coming.

The roses stiffen.

White and covered with frost.

They never even withered, standing as if arrested in death, hard frozen and tied up to the white house

wall with lengths of red wool: bound, arrested, forced to stand like icy mouths so open in the darkness.

Mist in the morning. It evaporates, hangs there like remnant splashes of water in the rose petals' furls, wet hair tied back in a ponytail and held with one hand so hard that you scream to the silence outside: Come. Winter comes, too early again, and the snow melts, the mist lifts, sunlight breaks through the white canopy of leaves and touches the frozen rose petals which close too late and wither.

Flowers tied up with wool from your red jumper.

White climbing roses.

In the garden.

In front of the house, tied to the white cladding with red wool fixed to the wall with drawing pins and looped around the flower stalks so as to force the white roses up towards the window where I sit and write.

Tied.

Tied to the house and the rooms where I'm also bound to the bed on which I lie and the chair on which I sit. I move round the house on an extending lead, with no desire to leave or break loose. Instead I

work at tightening the invisible threads which I prepare and make impervious, thicken and lengthen, so that I can tighten them up and twine them round and round my mouth and neck and chest, round and round, harder and harder, until at last I'm encased in a hard, white cocoon. A protective membrane of threads fixed to the walls and floor, writing table and chair. Here I sit, imprisoned and patient, forced to watch how the thin structure becomes so comprehensive and intricate that it can be called a home.

A home.

This road, ah that road, the gravel road that leads tentatively up to the house and is the same colour as the house because it's a part of the house, an extension of the door, a continuation of something inside; the bed, perhaps, where he lies and doesn't want to get up.

These hours in the middle of the day when you're wide awake and lie on the bed, not to sleep, not to rest, but to look out of the window, at the sky outside, to be even more wide awake. So wide awake that suddenly, in repose, he understands that he could lie like this for ever, motionless and without thoughts,

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but with a gaze so pure that it hurts. What is it he sees? The sky, the clouds, nothing more. But then he shifts his gaze and sees the walls and the ceiling of the room he's in; the lamp on the writing table by the window, the chair and the red carpet, the books on the bedside table and the notebooks with covers the same colour as the house, and this makes him think about all the things he cannot see, the things he should have described: the gravel road running down from the house, this road on which the trees cast shadows so hard and impassable that he wonders if he'll ever be able to cross them and leave the house.

The letter: 'It's probably true to say that I share Bonnard's taste for the uncomfortable. Simple furniture, hard chairs, spartan rooms, without decoration. They say that the room he worked in had no resting places, no sofa, no furniture. I believe he was too fond of all this to want to own it; he transferred it to his work. His work was to see. Outside the window, in the garden, Marthe lounges in an easy chair. Hair unkempt, a white dressing gown, it is morning or evening. His work was to observe her, he sketched what she did: how she woke in the morning, how she got up and

bathed, ate her breakfast, embroidered a tablecloth, wrote a letter. She sits in the garden, the letter lies on the table on the embroidered tablecloth. The light among the fruit trees, cherries in a basket, we could almost eat them. I sit at my writing table and look out; the fruit trees and garden table, the empty easy chair, it is Saturday or Sunday. I'm trying to write, but with no success so am writing this letter instead: I need you.'

I couldn't get to grips with this day, it turned into a totally hopeless day for me, it didn't turn out the way I'd wanted, well, what did I want of this day?

Can I say that I lost it, that I lost the day, how many days have I lost in this manner? It wasn't my day. The day began well, it was a good start to a good day: I left the house, went out of the door, down the gravel road, through the gate and left, heading for the long roundabout route to the shop, and I'd no sooner got on to my usual path, than I could tell this was the start of a good day: clouds above the neighbouring house. Heavy, static clouds of such density and weight that you stopped to look at them. Portentous clouds? If they'd been able to fall with the same weight that they hung in the air, they would have crushed my