



British Centre for
Literary Translation

NEW TRANSLATIONS BY NEW TRANSLATORS

FIRST LINES

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Acclaimed contemporary author Hanne Ørstavik made her literary breakthrough with the novel, Love, the first in what is considered to be a thematic trilogy. The novel is characterised by Ørstavik's literary minimalism, focus on social realism and engrossing portrayal of complex human relationships. Love tells the story of mother and son, Vibeke and Jon, as both make very separate journeys on a cold winter night in northern Norway. As Jon's 9th birthday approaches, Vibeke's uneasy acceptance of her maternal role is revealed to the reader in compelling depth.

Ørstavik's many acclaimed novels have thus far been translated into 15 languages, not yet including English. The author's sensitive portrayal of strong female characters and the unique landscape of Norway make her a particularly interesting author to follow during this period of peaked interest in Scandinavian literary exports.

from Love

Hanne Ørstavik

When I'm old we'll get away, take a train. As far as possible. Look out of the window at the mountains and cities and seas, talk to people from foreign lands. Be together all the time. Never reach a destination.

Three books a week, often four, five, even. She'd read all day if she could, curled up in bed under the duvet with coffee, endless cigarettes and a warm nightdress. She'd get rid of the TV too, I never watch it anyway, she thinks, but that probably wouldn't do for Jon.

She swerves to avoid an old lady staggering along the icy road with a grey shopping trolley in tow. It's dark; the banks of cleared snow suspended over the sides of the road cast shadows, Vibeke thinks. She realises then that she's forgotten to put her headlamps on and has driven almost all the way home in the dark. She switches them on.

Jon tries to stop himself blinking. He can't do it. The muscles around his eyes

have cramp. He sits kneeling on his bed looking out of the window. It's so quiet. He's waiting for Vibeke to come home. Calmly he attempts to hold his eyes open, staring at one spot outside the window. There's at least a metre of snow outside. Under the snow on the ground there are mice. They have their own passages and tunnels. They visit each another, thinks Jon, perhaps they take each other food.

The hum of the car. Waiting for it, he can't remember what it sounds like. I've forgotten it, he thinks. But then it arrives, mostly when he forgets all about it. Then she comes and he recognises it, he hears it with his stomach, it's my stomach that recognises the noise, not me, he thinks, and just after hearing the car he can see it out of the corner of the window, her blue car coming around the bend behind the banks of snow down by the road; she turns towards the house and drives up the little slope to the front door.

He can hear the engine, loud and clear from where he's sitting in his room before she switches it off. Then he hears her shut the car door and the front door to the house opens; he counts the seconds before it's closed again. The same sounds every day.

Vibeke shoves the carrier bags into the hallway and bends over to undo her boots. The cold has made her hands swell; the heater in the car has given up the ghost. She gave a colleague a lift home from the shop last week, and she had told Vibeke she knew someone who repaired that sort of thing on the cheap. Vibeke smiles at the thought. She doesn't have a lot of money, and what she does have she doesn't spend on the car. As long as it's still going, she's happy.

She picks up the post lying on the table underneath the mirror. Her shoulders ache, just as they should after a busy day; she rolls them back before stretching her neck, leaning her head back and letting out an "ah".

She's taking her coat off, he thinks, he imagines her in the hallway in front of the mirror, the way she hangs her coat up on the peg as she contemplates her reflection. She's probably tired, he thinks. He opens a box of matches and takes two. He places a matchstick in each eye to hold his eyelids open and stop him from blinking. You'll grow out of it, Vibeke tells him when she's in a good mood. The matchsticks are like branches, it's hard to see past them. He thinks about the train set, he can't help himself; no matter what else he's thinking about a train steams into his thoughts, hurtling around a bend and flying by with whistle blowing. Maybe he could give her a face massage, he thinks, massage her forehead and cheeks. They learned about it in school, it's supposed to be good.

She carries the bags into the kitchen and lays the post on the table. She piles the perishables in the fridge and pops the cans on a shelf. The engineer from the Technical Department, the dark one with the brown eyes, sat opposite her when they presented the Culture Programme's annual initiatives, her first assignment as the newly employed consultant. She had insisted on having the cover page printed in colour, an inspiring image by a local artist. She stands at the worktop drinking a glass of water. It had gone very well; people came over to speak to her afterwards and told her how happy they were to have her there. That she had given them new visions, that they could see new opportunities. His brown eyes had smiled at her repeatedly throughout the presentation; at the conclusion he made a remark about being exceptionally interested in cross-departmental cooperation.

She brushes some strands of hair away from her face, then gathers all of it over one shoulder and strokes it, happy at how long it's grown.

He hears her footsteps on the floor above him. Her shoes. Vibeke always wears something on her feet indoors. Like summer shoes with a low heel. He removes the matchsticks from his eyes, strikes one against the box and lets it burn, trying to hold it for as long as he can. She wears a skirt and lipstick at work. When she comes home she changes into a grey tracksuit that zips up to the neck. Maybe she's getting changed now. *It's so soft on the inside, come and have a feel.* She gave him a pair of slippers when they moved here. Brought them home from work on one of the first days, wrapped in flowery paper. She threw them at him and he had to catch them in mid-air. Woollen slippers, up to the ankle with leather soles. They fasten with little metal clasps. If he doesn't do them up, they clink as he walks.

Vibeke sets the glass of water down on the table. She looks out of the window; it's dark. The streetlights are on, lighting up the houses on both sides of the road. To the north, the minor road leads onto the major road again. It's a kind of circle, she thinks, you can drive into the centre, past the council buildings and the shops, through the residential area, turn onto the major road further up, follow it south and then drive into the centre all over again. Most houses have the living room windows facing the road. We have to do something related to integrated architecture. Behind the houses on all sides is forest. She notes down some keywords on her pad: identity, civic pride. Aesthetics. Information.

She makes her way into the living room. A grey woollen throw with white circles is spread over the sofa; the reverse is white with grey circles. She picks it up and pulls the armchair over to the radiator beneath the window. Takes a design

book from the small round table.

The book has a waxy cover, it feels nice to hold. She strokes it with her left hand before opening it. She reads a few lines then leans back, with the book open in her lap, and closes her eyes. She pictures faces from work, people who pop into the office, where it's so nice now. She plays back situations in her head, re-enacts her facial expressions.

Jon stands in the doorway watching her. He tries not to blink. He wants to ask her about something for his birthday, he'll be nine tomorrow. Now he thinks it can wait, she's asleep. A book in her lap. He's used to seeing her like this. A book, and the bright light of the standard lamp. Often she has a cigarette lit, and he likes to follow the smoke with his eyes as it coils up towards the ceiling. Her long, dark hair is spread against the chair; some of it hangs over the edge, swaying gently. *Stroke my hair, Jon.*

He turns into the kitchen and takes a few biscuits from the cupboard. He puts a whole one in his mouth and tries to suck it until it's soft without breaking it.

He goes down to his room again and kneels on the bed. He lines the biscuits up on his windowsill.

He looks out at the snow in front of his window, thinks of all the snowflakes it took to make one pile of snow. He tries to count them all in his head. They'd learned about that in school today. Snow crystals, they're called. Not one of them is the same. How many can there be in a snowball. Or in a little blob of snow stuck to the windowpane.

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Vibeke opens her eyes. Through the large living room windows she can see the rear lights of a car disappearing down the road. In her mind she goes through all the people she knows, wondering if it could be one of them. The engineer, she thinks, maybe it's him.

She sits up and looks at the clock, then heads for the kitchen where she puts some water on to boil and chops half an onion. As the water boils she takes the pan off the heat and adds the hot dogs, opens the fridge and puts back the other half of the onion. She turns on the radio. It's an interview, she doesn't listen much to what they are saying. The exchange of voices is like a melody in the background. She clears a bowl from the table. There are bits stuck to the edge and some milk in the bottom. She's still wearing her short skirt, it's old but it sits so nicely around her thighs and backside. Her thin tights are a luxury she permits herself. Most people

dress for the weather: thick tights, and an extra pair that they change out of in the toilets when they arrive anywhere. Life is too short not to look one's best, she thinks. Better to freeze.

She rinses the bowl under the tap, and attempts to remove some of the dried bits with the washing-up brush. Jon is the one who usually eats when he gets home from school. Biscuits, or cornflakes. He often has the radio on while he eats, and from time to time forgets to turn it off. There have been occasions when she's come home and heard the low murmur of voices from the hallway and wondered if there were people congregating in her kitchen.

The interview finishes; they play a song. She knows the group is familiar, knows the name exists somewhere in the back of her mind, but for the moment it escapes her. She feels the longing for a good book, a nice big fat one; the type that seems more definite and real than life itself. I deserve it, she thinks, after the work I've put in this week.

Jon sits down. The bed has been pushed up against the radiator underneath the window. When he lies down he can feel the warmth along one side of his body. At the bed head is a blue shelf with some bits and pieces stacked on it: magazines, sticky tape, a torch and a water pistol. He pushes a button on the radio on the shelf and fiddles with the dial until he finds a channel playing music. He tries to distinguish between the different instruments. Ethereal guitars, he thinks, because he's heard someone describe them like that before. Ethereal guitars.

He lies down and closes his eyes. He thinks that when he isn't thinking about anything, his head must be totally dark inside; like in a big room when the light is out.

She suddenly remembers the name of the group. Of course, she thinks. A scene from an exam celebration: another student, younger than her, with a ponytail, dancing to this very song. He had stood and rocked his hips rhythmically behind her in a fairly vulgar fashion. She smiles.

She takes a packet of potato cakes from a drawer along with a fork to lift the hot dogs out of the water. She pops her head into the hallway and shouts for Jon, finds the mat for the pan and sets it down on the table. She wants to light a candle, but she can't find any in the drawer; probably forgot to buy them. There's no sign of Jon. She shouts once again, then makes her way down the stairs and into his room.

He's dreaming about playing basketball with some friends: it's sunny and warm

and he scores some baskets and bounds joyfully into the house to tell Vibeke. She walks slowly out of the kitchen. He starts to talk to her, but the smile on her face is so strange that he turns to go downstairs to his room. Around the corner on the staircase is a woman who looks exactly like Vibeke. She whispers to him as if trying to entice him. As he is about to hug her, a third woman comes up the stairs. Maybe she's Vibeke. He stands stock-still.

He wakes up to find Vibeke standing in the doorway, the light shining brightly from behind her. She tells him it's time to eat.

Jon follows her up the stairs and they sit at the kitchen table. Vibeke turns off the radio. She flicks through the post as she eats. Jon sees advertising brochures from furniture companies and large supermarkets. On a flyer he sees one word printed: FUNFAIR. He asks what else it says. Vibeke reads aloud that a funfair has come to the playing field by the council buildings, with a UFO ride and a centrifugal force machine. The funfair isn't your kind of place, Jon, she says. Jon asks if they have 3D games. Vibeke doesn't know what they are. Spaceship simulators and stuff, says Jon, computer games where you sit inside a machine and steer it through outer space and have to overcome obstacles. Vibeke looks again at the flyer, but can't see anything about that.

He looks at her as she continues to eat and browse; he can hear the taut skin of the hot dog pop as she bites.

Jon helps himself to another sausage. They stack up in his stomach like felled logs in a forest, and there's always room for one more.