Lars Petter Sveen

*The Art of Stammering – Without Anyone Noticing*

Non-fiction, 2022

Translated from the Norwegian

by Rosie Hedger

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*Since I can’t say everlasting, I say every lost thing*

From *Stutter* by Adam Giannelli

I

Fainting

1

*In fact, one time they were doing a.. eeh.. eeh.. I had a small part in a movie, and… aaah… assistant director came in and he yelled at me. Oh, he talked awful, and he … And, so, I…When I got into the scene, I, instead of my lines, wo-wo-wo-wo… The director came up to me, furious, and said: You don’t stutter! I said: That’s what you think.*

Marilyn Monroe

2

At six o’clock on Wednesday 13 October 2021, I park up on Uranienborgveien in Oslo. I’ve come straight from work at Bærum Public Library and I’m about to take the stage at the House of Literature.

 I’ve been invited with four other authors to speak on the topic of nature and the climate emergency, with a particular focus on the call to action for authors. The hall is packed with people, and the event is being filmed in order that it can be forwarded to the new Minister of Climate and the Environment.

 I’m sitting on stage in the Wergeland Room alongside the others, Maja Lunde and Simon Stranger, both of whom I’ve met previously. The stage lights are intense, they make the entire audience look like a gaggle of mannequins.

 I try taking deep, steady breaths, cross my legs at the ankle.

 When it’s my turn to speak, I get up and make my way over to the lectern, read the first few sentences of my script, try my best to glance up every so often. Everything is going well. All very typical. I feel in control and carry on. I read on, word by word, sentence by sentence.

 And that’s when it happens, without me really realising what it is.

 I’ve made it almost halfway through when I hear a high-pitched squealing in my left ear.

 I glance up.

 There is a rushing sound, like the roar of the sea.

 I open my mouth, say something, but I can’t hear my own voice.

 I’m falling, I think to myself, and try to hold onto the lectern.

 Then everything goes black.

3

After finishing high school, I didn’t know what I wanted in life; I applied to join the army, ended up on their base at Skjold and agreed to ship out to Kosovo the following year as part of KFOR. The first six months were tough for many of us, but most of us persevered and in December the entire camp was assembled in a large square that had been cleared ready for us, platoons lined up in blocks, packed snow underfoot. An icy wind blew our way from Mauken, the mountainous region where the artillery range was located, and the chilly gusts whipped our earlobes red. Our commander-in-chief stood before us and waited, allowing the silence to settle before the lieutenant colonel uttered a few crackled words about our first months as recruits over the loud speaker. We were being permitted leave to fly home for Christmas, we deserved it, he said, and then the captain took over and proceeded to tell us what to expect upon our return.

 Someone had decided that the army chaplain also ought to be allowed to say a few words. The commander-in-chief made room for the chaplain before moving to stand behind him.

 I can’t recall what the chaplain said to us, I’m not even sure I understood him.

 He stammered on every single word.

 First there was silence, as if he were gasping for air, followed by repetitions that eventually formed one word, then another, followed by silence and yet more gasping. It was as if a formidable invisible force was trying to drag something out of the uniformed body before us as that same body fought against it with every ounce of strength he had.

 I hoped things might ease up for him, or that one of the commanding officers up there beside him might step in, place a hand over the microphone, whisper, *it’s alright* before moving on with the rest of the programme.

 Instead, some of us recruits began to laugh, a low, almost inaudible swell of laughter that rippled through each and every block of recruits lined up in neat rows.

 I laughed along with them. I laughed, and felt a hammering in my chest, a rushing in my ears.

4

 When I come round, Maja and Simon are sitting there, both of them staring at me.

 We’re backstage at the House of Literature, in the tiny kitchen located by the staircase leading down into the Wergeland Room.

 Are you back with us? Maja asks.

 I look at them, at my hands, at the closed door that leads out onto the stage.

 Yes, I say, yes, I’m back.

 Simon describes the way I’d so abruptly stopped in my tracks. He’d thought it was all part of some sort of performance at first. After about twenty seconds, though, he’d noticed me swaying and realised that I was about to fall over. He’d run over and held me upright, then Maja had joined him and they’d walked me off the stage. When they’d tried speaking to me, I hadn’t responded. I hadn’t said a single word.

 Not a word? I ask.

 No, Simon says. Can you remember anything about what happened?

 Nothing. Are you sure I didn’t say anything?

 You didn’t say anything after the point you stopped reading.

 I take a deep breath.

 I’ve not been exposed; they haven’t heard it.

5

*I could hardly talk. It took me three minutes to complete a sentence. It was crushing for anyone who wanted to express themselves, who wanted to be heard and couldn’t. It was frightening. Yet, when I became another character, in a play, I lost the stutter. It was phenomenal.*

Bruce Willis

6

It must have started when I was just a few years old, but the one memory that sticks is from when I was about nine. We were due to put on a Christmas show for our parents at school. I can’t remember what it was about, nor the name of the small role I was to play, nor what I was actually supposed to be doing in that role.

 I can only remember what I was unable to say.

 When I was handed the sheet and saw my lines, I knew at once what would happen. Even so, I did nothing about it.

 In the Christmas show, my character’s line was as follows: ‘I think it likes cheese.’

 It’s ridiculous, really. Both the idea that this simple sentence could present such a terrifying prospect to me, and the fact that I remember it so clearly to this day.

 In the weeks leading up to the performance, we spent a lot of lesson time practising. Whenever it was my turn to say my line, I pretended to have forgotten it. This always led to someone else saying it for me. I remember thinking: this isn’t on. I need to say something.

 And I tried. But whenever I found myself on the cusp of telling my teacher that I couldn’t say the word ‘cheese’, I held back.

 This was to be the first of countless times this would happen in my life.

It was the vowel that plagued me most, the ‘o’ in ‘ost’, the Norwegian word for cheese; it had me well and truly stuck.

 A method I’ve used since then is to rattle off a sentence extremely quickly in order to reach the word that plagues me. When I feel the word beginning to stick, I pause and add an ‘eeeh’ sound, right up until I can make the transition from ‘eeeh’ to ‘o’ in ‘ost’. Taking this approach, the sentence becomes ‘I think it likes *eeeh-ost*.’ If I find myself having to say it quickly to avoid any lingering over the ‘eeeh’ before the word ‘ost’ can escape my lips, it quickly becomes ‘Ithinkitlikes*eehost*.’

 If that doesn’t work, I can always repeat the sentence until I’m able to come up with a new word, something else I can use instead of *ost*. For instance, I can specify the type of cheese, *brunost* or *gulost*, then run the sentence together at speed as before, but this time with a more specific cheese at the end of it.

 But I hadn’t learned these techniques by the age of nine.

 Not that it would have done me much good, as it happens, because the problem had spread. It had worked its way back from the problematic *ost* to the entire sentence leading up to it. The whole thing had become infected. After a few rehearsals in the classroom, I couldn’t even utter the first few words of the sentence ‘I think it likes cheese’ without stammering.

The day we were due to perform the play arrived, as such days always do: they are unstoppable. I was gripped with dread from the moment I woke up. The staircase leading from the ground floor to our classroom on the third floor was longer than usual, the banister suddenly too far away to lend me any support. The gap between my desk and those of my classmates was greater, and whenever I moved, my chair creaked. Back at home that evening I couldn’t eat dinner. I hoped something might happen, anything at all that might prevent Mum and Dad and my brothers from attending the Christmas show.

 But they did attend, of course, and I don’t think they quite understood what unfolded there.

 Nor did anybody else, for that matter.

 I waited and waited. I felt stiffer with every passing minute. It was as if my entire body was made of steel wire, starting at my toes and winding up my spine and spreading all the way out to my fingertips; it felt as though someone had twisted me around and around, over and over, and my body was doing all it could to unravel.

 When the moment arrived and I found myself face-to-face with my classmate Marit, a certain relief washed over me. Finally, the time had come.

 I said nothing.

 I didn’t even try.

 I stood there in silence and stared into the distance, just off to the side of Marit’s head.

 Both my teacher and Marit whispered my line to me: I think it likes cheese.

 I said nothing.

 I think it likes cheese, they whispered.

 I said nothing.

 Other classmates sitting in the audience started to hiss my line at me: I think it likes cheese!

 I said nothing.

 After what felt like minutes, but which was no doubt only a few seconds, Marit continued with her lines as if nothing had happened. The scene was over and the play continued, and I sat back down with my family. I pretended as if nothing were amiss. Nobody said anything. Not there and then, and not after we got home.

 Nobody said a single word about what had happened.

 Had I stood there and tensed every muscle in my body, blinked and stamped one foot and eventually managed to get the words out after uttering numerous distorted, abnormal vowel sounds, then everyone in the room would have been certain to have remembered it for the rest of their lives.

 If I had stammered, then everybody would have remembered.

 That’s how I saw things.

7

I start a collection of clips featuring people with stammers. Occasionally I close my eyes when I’m watching films and television programmes: what does a particular voice tell you about the person speaking?

 I spend most of my time listening to villains in Hollywood films. Hearing them is just as important as seeing them. I note the way Alan Rickman captivates the audience with his unique manner of speaking in *Die Hard*, or how the hairs on my arms stand on end whenever Anthony Hopkins opens his mouth in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Or what about Darth Vader, a favourite of every child when it comes to imitating villains? Vader is played by British actor David Prowse, but at some point during the production process for the first Star Wars film, George Lucas decided that Prowse’s own voice wasn’t the best choice for the character. American actor James Earl Jones was called upon to embody the character’s speech, and it is his voice that we hear as Darth Vader takes to our screens. James Earl Jones struggled with a stammer from childhood, and yet his deep, rumbling bass tones are among the most familiar in the world: ‘I find your lack of faith disturbing’.

 How we speak says something about our character. People who stammer live all over the world, they exist in every culture, profession and class, every age bracket and sex.

There is evidence of our existence in ancient Chinese, Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures. We can even be found in the Bible, where revelations and praise and curse words are cried out here, there and everywhere. At primary school I learned about the Jewish baby who floated down the river in a basket, a baby who would later liberate an entire nation from slavery, a tale so crucial within the Bible that even the story of Jesus himself is built upon its foundations. But when I read Exodus and the story of Moses now, I notice something I hadn’t spotted before: could it be the case that Moses had a stammer? He doesn’t want to meet with Pharoah to convey the word of God. Instead, he says the following: ‘O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.’ And when Moses finally *does* stand before Pharoah, he has his brother Aron speak for him, a well-known trick used by those of us who stammer.

 I don’t know, perhaps I’m reading the Bible with the aim of finding myself within its pages. But isn’t that how we always read the Bible? And the question is there, it refuses to go away: where is *our* story, where are *we* in history?

 I hide my stammer, clasping my hands and slapping my leg when the words get stuck, running for miles fuelled by shame on the days my words get mixed up and my voice disappears, cringing at the tiniest slip-up in my speech; in spite of all of this, though, I’ve always sought out role models who stammer. While working the evening shift one Wednesday at the library, and when I’m sure no one is looking, I search for books with the word ‘stammer’ in the title. I stumble across *The Trouble with Words* by Åse Sjøstrand, a speech and language therapist who wrote about the public stigma associated with stammering. She cites research that suggests that those who stammer are afraid of being perceived as ‘stupid, strange, not good enough, incompetent, a freak or otherwise abnormal’. But the shame isn’t only internal; several studies have also shown that those of us who stammer are perceived to be ‘shy, nervous, anxious, withdrawn, conceited, tense, hesitant, embarrassed, introverted and uncertain’. Our professional peers also consider us to be less attractive and less competent or intelligent, as well as naturally unsuited to professions that require us to do a great deal of talking.

 There’s nothing to say that I would face similar prejudices. I simply have no idea, given the fact that I’ve done everything within my power since childhood to avoid situations and words that might cause my stammer to reveal itself to those around me. I’ve taught myself a technique for expressing myself, a technique with one sole purpose: to allow me to speak in such a way that nobody would ever know I have a stammer.

 I’ve attempted to exercise complete control.

 I think the same is true for many of us who stammer. It can feel as though there’s no place for us in a society that considers communication and correct speech to be such valuable attributes. The space between the way in which something is said and how the speaker is perceived is miniscule. You *become* your voice, just as your words become your actions. So where does that leave me when I begin to stammer?

 While out by one of the street food stands in Torggata Bad in Oslo one afternoon, I happened to mention to a fellow author, Ida, that I was writing a book about stammering. We sat chatting for a long time, Ida had just as many questions as I did, not least about my own stammer, but she prefaced it all by telling me that I ought to read the essay ‘The Gender of Sound’ by Anne Carson. It’s an essay about gender, that fact is undeniable, but Carson’s work is also very interesting for me as someone with a stammer because I can see something of myself within it, and perhaps this is how Ida saw things too. Carson makes connections around the rules and norms of how we *ought* to sound, as well as how we ought to listen:

Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public. A piece of inside projected to the outside. The censorship of such projections is a task of patriarchal culture that (as we have seen) divides humanity into two species: those who can censor themselves and those who cannot.

Carson isn’t writing about stammering; she’s writing about the ways in which the ancient Greeks discussed and attempted to silence the sounds of women. Not necessarily because of *what* they said, but because of the *sounds* they made. The ideal woman was never heard in public, and Timycha of Sparta was considered a heroine and prime example of this, choosing to bite off her own tongue rather than to answer a question posed to her. This backwards sense of pride bears a certain resemblance to my own circumventions, my own decision to stand there in silence on stage at nine years old, and it often strikes me as a virtue of sorts. Behind an expression such as ‘silence is golden’ is the idea that anything left unsaid would do greater harm than good. With that in mind, things seem clear: keep quiet, bite your tongue, bite it right off if need be. As someone with a stammer who chooses to *hide* it, that’s precisely how I’ve conditioned myself to view things. I operate on the basis that saying something incorrectly is worse than saying something *incorrect*.

 People often say that it’s not just *what* someone says but also the *way* they say it that matters; for those of us who stammer, this is more than simply a political dogma or an aesthetic assessment of eminent speakers and demagogues. It is an uncomfortable truth. A limited number of ways of speaking are considered acceptable, and we censor any that deviate from that norm; they are indicative of a particular quality, often negative, or of noise, or bad habits. The norms around how we ought to sound are so deep-seated that anything that deviates from these is suppressed, not only by those with power, but also by those without, those responsible for those deviations. Those who stammer do not often speak up.

When a person’s voice falters, when the words simply won’t emerge, it draws attention to a flaw in a person’s character. It gives people something to laugh at.

 Just as we laughed at Ed Balls. He was a British Labour politician between the years of 2005 and 2015, and has spoken publicly about the experience of being ridiculed for his stammer. It was particularly challenging for him to read aloud in front of a crowd.

 In recordings available to watch online, you can see Ed Balls speaking both on morning television programmes and before parliament. His stammer is not particularly noticeable, but when he begins reading aloud from a political document in parliament, it becomes more obvious. He begins to stammer, not a great deal, but sufficient to provoke shouting and laughter among his political opponents. Former Prime Minister David Cameron roars with laughter as if he were sitting in some sort of comedy club. Cameron was responsible for giving Balls the nickname ‘Blinky Balls’, no doubt due to his habit of blinking when he struggled to articulate particular words.

 Hollering, whooping and cheering are all traditional aspects of UK parliamentary proceedings, but the whole set-up is hostile by nature, not least because Balls appears so lost and alone. Nobody stands up to call a half to the ridicule or comes to his defence. Ed Balls himself has spoken of hearing one of his own party members sitting just behind him remark: ‘He’s supposed to be the secretary of state and he can’t even get the words out of his mouth’.

 When Barack Obama’s former Vice President Joe Biden stood against sitting President Donald Trump, numerous commentators in the US and elsewhere in the world pointed out the fact that Biden came across as muddled during debates. He would trip over his words, mumble at points, and would be forced to begin sentences all over again. It was highlighted as a weakness that might lead to losing the debates, not to mention the election as a whole. President Donald Trump called Biden ‘Sleepy Joe’, a nickname that was used repeatedly by Trump supporters and the media alike.

 Few understood that Biden’s struggles were the result of a stammer.

 It wasn’t his advanced years or a lack of preparation that caused him to mumble. Biden mumbled and struggled to find the words he needed for the same reason I’ve taught myself to mutter and express myself with a lack of precision: I do so to avoid revealing the fact I have a stammer.

 It was during the election campaign that Biden’s stammer first became a topic of national interest. Biden was 77 years old before he publicly addressed the stigma, and as someone who avoided anything to do with stammering, I only became aware of it when a colleague from the newspaper *Vårt Land* happened to share an interview with Biden published in *The Atlantic*. The journalist who interviewed him, John Hendrickson, conducted the interview in such a way that it also encompassed his own experience of stammering, and he quoted Biden word-for-word, including any pauses and the barely audible difficulty with the letter ‘h’ at the beginning of the word ‘hard’. Hendrickson’s interview was widely praised and discussed at length in the year 2020, and Biden soon turned his stammer into a strength, both in the telling of stories from his childhood and through taking time out on his campaign trail to meet with others facing the same struggles. Other well-known celebrities including Emily Blunt and Ed Sheeran have also given speeches and interviews in which they discuss their own stammers, and their difficulties are also barely noticeable to the rest of us. It is as if we are required to conceal our stammers before we are able to admit to having one. I’ve felt the same way, not least while writing this book. If I have to talk about stammering, I want to do everything in my power *not* to stammer while doing so. The shame is so deep-rooted that even now I will not voluntarily stammer in anyone else’s presence. I do not often have an issue when speaking, but occasionally I find myself buttoning up, the words failing to emerge as they should. And when that happens, I remain silent, opt against raising my hand in class even when I know the answer, sit in silence in the football locker room, choose not to speak at the annual gathering of my political youth organisation even when a topic close to my heart is up for discussion. I might be at the pub with friends, laughing at what others have to say while the things I’d like to add remain locked up inside. I hold my tongue at work meetings, focus on my food in the canteen, avoid responding when someone disagrees with me, hang up the phone and silently admit defeat when calling the bank for the fourth time and finding myself suddenly unable to say my own name. I get my children to ask where we can find toothbrushes in the supermarket, where the eggs are kept, whether the bus stops at Lørenskog.

 Slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.

But eventually Joe Biden was elected President of the United States. He pauses at points where there ought not to be pauses, swaps out words here and there, exhales before he speaks and maintains fluency with the help of the odd ‘eeeh’. One of the most powerful men in the world has a stammer.

8

*But, you know, I haven’t stuttered in so long that it’s hhhhard for me to remember the specific … What I do remember is the feeling.*

Joe Biden

9

When I stammer, it is as if there is a band of steel across my forehead, as if someone is holding my head in place. Something inside of me has no desire to emerge, it resists. It is as if a key is turned; my jaw locks in place, my throat closes up, my chests tightens, my diaphragm seizes up and my stomach becomes a dark void.

 But I don’t stammer.

 I have it under control.

 I know what needs to be said before I say it, and if it should clutch at me and take hold somehow, I know what I can say instead. I have two watches, a phone that’s always charged up, and an extra shirt and pair of socks in my bag, just in case I sweat more than usual. I create time sheets for my writing, and I submit time sheets to my manager at the library. I have an almanac detailing what needs doing each day, and I cross out each thing as I go. I do not stammer because I take care not to. I take care not to in order to keep myself from getting anxious, because if I should start to feel anxious, then I start to feel tired, and if I start to feel tired, I might lose control and start to stammer.

 I need this sense of control; it’s not simply a fear of stammering that it centres around, but also a desire to speak out.

Even at primary school, at some point after the incident at the school performance, I taught myself to use scripts that presented me with various alternatives whenever I was due to speak in front of the class. I had to make sure that the combination of words I chose didn’t feature any traps, no words that might catch me out and unleash explosive repetitions and obstacles, and the sentences had to follow on from one another with a nice sense of rhythm. It was only once I got into that rhythm that I felt safe.

 But quite often I wanted to say something *without* relying on a script. I wanted to answer a question or respond when I disagreed with something, I didn’t always want to pretend that I didn’t know something, or that I’d forgotten what I was going to say when things seized up on the inside.

 I arrived late to my history class at Fræna Secondary School one day. We were due to present on the various aspects of Norwegian society during the Viking age, and I hadn’t prepared anything in advance. The teacher was annoyed that I had arrived late and asked me to give my presentation then and there. I probably could have got away with it somehow, told him that I didn’t have anything to say, maybe, I was totally unprepared, after all. But instead, I did something I’d never done before: I made my way over to the teacher’s desk and I improvised. One week earlier, while gathered around the dinner table, Dad had told my brothers and I the story of how Loki had conspired to kill Baldur, and of his subsequent capture at the hands of the other Norse gods, and it was this story that poured forth from me. I rounded off my spontaneous presentation by telling the class and teacher that the story was an example of how religion and myth offers explanations of phenomena that people were otherwise unable to rationalise. Every living creature weeps over Balder’s death, and this story offers an explanation for the existence of morning dew. Loki was punished, tied up and left in an underground cave, and whenever a drop of venom from the Midgard serpent falls on his head, he thrashes around in such pain that earthquakes cause the ground to shake beneath our feet.

 The teacher was impressed, my friends all clapped, and so I decided to do the same again, to improvise, to give an off-the-cuff presentation in my geography class. I felt certain I’d mastered the skills required and could pull it off once again. Instead, everything seized up. The teacher started to ask me questions. I said nothing, just stood there with a slightly lopsided smile on my face, gently shaking my head, my hands buried deep in my pockets. Eventually he asked me to sit down again, and I could hear him cursing under his breath.

I longed to feel the words slip out of me with ease, as they had done on the day I’d stepped into my history class and regaled everyone with the tale of Balder and Loki. I know that I’m able to speak freely in front of others, I do it all the time. I have good days, and on those good days I think: this is how things are meant to be. And then the bad days come around, and I think: this is me, this is who I am.

 The fear of stammering quickly overpowers any desire to speak up.

10

Stammering was a normal feature of my upbringing. Not with friends or at school or at football. Not on television or radio.

 But it was a normal feature in our family life.

 Both my younger brother Tor Henrik and I had a stammer, and we weren’t the only ones.

 During the Easter or summer holidays, our five uncles and aunts and all their children would arrive en masse at the family farm in Sogn, which our grandparents had run as a restaurant and guest house, and which their children now flocked to for family get-togethers. Two of my uncles stammered, one so severely that I used to think he might explode.

 Us children used to love it when he got fired up in discussions between the grown-ups, cursing loudly in his broad east coast dialect. His every expression was so forceful and loud, and the way he stammered and elongated his words caused his profanities to reverberate around us with power and warmth. My brothers and I still imitate the way he swore to this day. Or rather, the way he stammered.

 There was something different about my other uncle who stammered, though. Everything about him was different; we didn’t have the words to describe his autism, or his white hair and red eyes. Nor did we need them, because he was simply our uncle, one of us. One day he disappeared, it was in the summer, and we were all sent out to look for him. I strode through the long grass just beyond the farmhouse, between the cherry trees, right up to the old fence that marked the boundary between us and the forest beyond it. I thought I saw something moving between the tree trunks, so I climbed over the fence.

 My uncle was standing by a tree, gazing at the tiny brook snaking its way downhill. I said his name and he turned to look at me.

 Lars Petter, is that you? he asked. Has Lars Petter come to find me?

 Every time he said my name, he got stuck on the L in Lars and the P in Petter.

 It’s me, I replied.

 Alright, he said, alright.

 The word seemed to stick on both attempts.

He didn’t move, and I said no more. We heard some of the others calling his name further downhill.

 They’re all looking for you, I said, and I stammered on the l in looking and the f in for.

 Yes, they’re looking for me, he said, but I’m not hiding, I’m right here, he said, I’m here.

 He stammered on his l and his f and his m and then on his b and his I and his n and his h and his I again and his r and his h, then his I again and his h.

 I nodded, but realised that he couldn’t see me with his red eyes, so I spoke up, said yes.

 Yes, I said, maybe we should go down and tell them, that you’re here?

 I stammered on the d in down and the a in and the th in that and the h in here.

 My uncle nodded and we made our way out of the forest together, climbing the fence and walking down towards the farmhouse where my father and uncles and aunts stood waiting. When they started telling him off, my father stepped in and asked them to leave him be. My aunt followed my uncle into the kitchen and my father laid a hand on my shoulder, asked me to show him where I’d found my uncle, and together we made our way up to where he’d been standing. I asked my father why it was so dangerous for my uncle to be out on his own, why we had to go out looking for him. My father sat down on the ground, his back resting against a pine tree, he was young when this happened and his hair was cropped short above his ears, still dark, his face clean-shaven.

 Your uncle is like a jigsaw puzzle, Dad said, before reconsidering his words and saying: I suppose we’re all like jigsaw puzzles, when it comes down to it.

 He picked up a pine cone then tossed it to one side.

 Your uncle, he said, then paused, he seemed to be working his way up to saying something. When it comes to your uncle, he said, we can see exactly how the pieces fit together. And as we look at those individual puzzle pieces, it can be harder to see how they all fit together to make a bigger picture.

 I thought he would say something about his younger brother, my uncle, missing some jigsaw pieces. But those were the words he chose, we could see how the pieces fit together, and although I’ve never forgotten his words, it was a long time before I understood what they meant.

Nobody in the family ever said anything about the fact that several of us struggled with our words. Dad once remarked in later years that he thought most of us were fine, that we’d found our own ways of dealing with things. He’s right and wrong about that, because even though we came up with our own ways of navigating things, we felt lost along the way nevertheless. I saw my uncles, I watched them stammer, and I, too, stammered along with them. We stammered at the dinner table during the holidays and as we walked through the forest around the farm and as we hiked up to the family’s mountain cabin. I ought to have had a good, strong ballast to help me understand my own stammer and to process my own reactions. But we never spoke about the fact that we stammered. Not a single word was ever said about it. And one way or another, I made a connection between stammering and illness. The fact my uncles stammered was connected to the other things they struggled with. There was nothing wrong with my uncle and aunt who didn’t stammer, nor with my own father, who was similarly unaffected. And just like that, through one faulty connection, I arrived at the conclusion that those who stammer are somehow unwell. But there was nothing wrong with me, and I certainly didn’t want people to think *I* was unwell. I became certain at that point, certain that our voices don’t simply show *what* we have to say, but *who we are*. Our voices reveal us to the world.

 I heard my uncles caught up in a tangle of their own words, trapped by them, I saw my uncle hiding in the forest. I didn’t want to be like them. I didn’t want people to see how the pieces of me fitted together.

11

*I was afraid if people knew I stuttered, they would have thought something was wrong with me.*

Joe Biden

12

An ambulance crew picks me up from the House of Literature and takes me to the walk-in clinic on Storgata, where they take my temperature, measure my blood pressure, check my pulse and cover me in electrodes to perform an ECG for good measure.

 I spend most of my time there sitting around, waiting. A young woman emerges from the toilet in floods of tears. A foreign couple with a newborn baby is escorted out by police officers. There’s a distinct odour of faeces coming from an elderly woman who doesn’t look as if she knows quite where she is. Two young boys play on a phone while the father of one of them sits with his arms crossed, wearing a vacant stare.

 Wait here, a nurse in a white uniform tells me after checking my heart.

 Can I go home? I ask her.

 She stops and looks at me, then glances over at the others waiting to be admitted.

 It was probably just stress, I say, I hadn’t had enough to eat, and it’s been a busy day at work.

 The nurse falls silent for a few seconds.

 Let me speak to the doctor first, she says, I want her to check your ECG results. OK?

 I wait there for a quarter of an hour before she returns.

 The doctor can’t see any abnormalities, she says.

 She’s carrying two plastic cups filled with squash.

 Drink this before you go, she says, handing me one of them.

It’s cold and grey as I make my way out onto Storgata. I call my wife, Tale, she’s in the middle of putting the children to bed.

 I fainted, I tell her, I’ve just been to the walk-in clinic.

 Wait there, she says, and I can hear her telling our children to keep their voices down. She closes a door, and then she’s back on the other end of the line: What happened?

 I tell her everything from the start, try to keep things in the right order.

 When will you be home? she asks.

 Soon, I tell her.

 I’m hungry, it’s been six hours since I last had anything to eat. I make my way to a Burger King by the junction on Nygata. There’s never usually anyone there, and those who are there barely register the others around them. It’s a good place to disappear.

 As I eat my burger, I go over what happened.

 Things had been the same as they always are before I ever go on stage.

 I’ve never fainted before. Why did I lose control today of all days?

 I check my phone. Simon has sent me a message and Maja has tried calling.

 I message both briefly before getting up to leave. My body feels stiff, as if I’ve been out running for hours. I need to get home; I need to rest.

 My car is parked where I left it on Uranienborgveien. As I reverse out of my space, I’m struck by a sudden fear that I might black out while I’m driving. What if it *is* my heart, some sort of condition they wouldn’t be able to diagnose at the walk-in clinic, the kind of illness that goes undiscovered until a post-mortem is performed. That’s what happened to that Danish footballer last summer, Christian Eriksen, he was an elite sportsman and still he had collapsed on the pitch in the middle of a game, it had been during the championships and he was clinically dead for a good few minutes before they’d managed to resuscitate him. I call Tale, she picks up straightaway, chuckles when I admit that I’m afraid to drive myself home without her on the other end of the phone.

 Talk to me, she says, go for it.

 And so I chat to her as I drive, make my way along Josefines gate and past Bislett, around St. Hanshaugen and down towards Ila, then up Uelands gate. Past Sagene, Voldsløkka, Nydalen, Storo, chatting all the way until I’m back at home in Grefsen.

 Is that you back? Tale asks me.

 I’m back, I say, thank you.

 Good stuff, I’ll come down now.

 She tells me that our eldest son can’t find his toothbrush and that she needs to go out to buy him a replacement.

 OK, I say, hanging up and turning off the engine. Silence falls, the sound of nothing presses against my eardrums, I feel almost feverish, a stiff layer of sweat clinging to my skin. The front door opens and Tale makes her way towards me, attempting to pull on her coat as she comes down. She’s going to ask me to see a doctor, to make sure they check me out properly, find out what happened. And she won’t stop nagging me about it until I’ve done exactly that. But regardless of what they find, one thing is certain: I need to regain my sense of self-control.

13

It marked the start of something new the day I chose not to say my lines at the Christmas performance all those years ago.

 I taught myself to get away with appearing on stage.

 Occasionally I dream about that afternoon at Haukås Primary School in Fræna. Everybody is there, my parents, other people’s parents, my classmates, the music teacher, and just there behind her is the dark green chalkboard on which someone has written Class 4A.

When I look back on my childhood, it feels as though something is missing. A word unspoken, a personal attribute never acquired, an inability to speak up when something was difficult.

 One day in year 5, I must have been about 10 at the time, I was busy in the woodworking department, tucked away in a small room in the far corner using a pyrography pen to write ‘Mum and Dad’ on a chopping board I’d spent hours and hours sanding. My friend William pressed his face to the glass panel in the door and grimaced at me. Keen to play along, I stood up and banged my fist against the glass, but instead of making a loud noise, the glass unexpectedly shattered, covering the pane in a distorted pattern of white stripes. Our teacher reprimanded me and sent for the deputy head. With his spectacles on a chain around his neck and mumbling under his breath in his distinctively deep, resonant tones, the deputy head measured the broken window with a measuring tape before eventually turning around, giving me a stern look and stating the importance of looking after school property.

 The bill will be sent to your parents, he said.

 I said nothing, not then and there, and not at home. Because if nothing was said then perhaps the whole incident would disappear as if it had never happened in the first place, and my parents might never hear of it. But it didn’t disappear. I became scared of going to school, I would sit and wait for the class door to swing open and the deputy head to march in and slap a bill on my desk. I checked the post every day before my parents, waiting and waiting, and then eventually, several weeks after the episode in woodworking class, one evening when Mum and I were at home together just the two of us, I made my way in to the living room where she was sitting and broke down in tears. I told her everything. She was surprised, assured me it was nothing to cry about.

 It’s fine, she said, it was just an accident.

 It was an accident, and my parents paid the bill without any need for us to say another thing about it.

 We didn’t talk about my stammer either. The words required to discuss anything difficult were lacking. Is it possible to conceal a stammer from your own parents? I don’t think so. Perhaps they played the whole thing down, perhaps they thought my stammer was a thing of the past. If nothing was said, perhaps it would disappear. Perhaps Dad thought I’d worked out a way of dealing with it, given that none of my teachers ever found fault with me, other than the occasion when I shattered a windowpane in woodworking class.

 I had worked something out. Using just a few simple steps, I could make my stammer disappear. Firstly, I had to steer clear of appearing on stage. Secondly, I had to avoid reading aloud in front of people. Thirdly, I had to think long and hard about exactly what I was going to say before sharing my thoughts with a group of people.

 For many years I learned to live within these confines.

 Avoiding being on stage was easy. Nobody asked me to tread the boards, and I didn’t request the pleasure. In fact, the only time I ever did appear on stage as a child was as part of a band I formed with a few friends. I was on vocals, but none of us actually played, and I certainly didn’t do any singing. We mimed along to AC/DC. The band was a success of sorts, we performed a few times over the course of a school year, and I wasn’t required to say or sing a word.

 It was more difficult to avoid reading aloud. I would always do my best to get up and move around the class or ask to go to the toilet when my turn was due, but it was inevitable: my turn would come. English class was the worst; my limited vocabulary and the list of words I was able to pronounce without issue had to be enunciated exactly as my teacher instructed – unlike when I spoke Norwegian, there was no wiggle room for dialectal differences or individual eccentricity that might allow me to choose alternative words or expressions.

 And how those hours dragged. Everything fell into sharp focus: the eraser dragging grey streaks of pencil across the paper rather than actually erasing anything, the pencil slipping and sliding around in my sweaty hands. The gaping void within me, the silent, numbing sense of panic. It’s odd how intensely present you feel when confronted by something that fills you with dread.

 In Norwegian class, I skipped over any words I couldn’t say, or tacked them on the end of the word that preceded them. In English I would simply clam up until someone else had to take over.

 It was easier to avoid speaking in assembly. I could sit back and listen to the others, laugh when they laughed, stay quiet when they stayed quiet.

 And it wasn’t as if I lived my life in silence, because I *wanted* to speak. The words emerged as entirely functional sentences as long as I didn’t think too much about the fact I was going to say anything. *Preparing* myself to speak, standing opposite someone who would be listening, *that* was what had to be avoided. Because if someone were to hear me stammer, I felt sure they’d laugh at me. Laughter is a beautiful thing. The ripple of laughter from a small child, the face of a friend cracking up. But when people are laughing *at* you, laughter feels like standing on the periphery, it positions you as the other, the bird separated from the flock overhead, flapping helplessly beneath them as they cross the ocean in a perfect line.

 The ability to laugh at oneself is underrated. Perhaps we consider it to be at odds with the notion of respecting oneself: to be laughed at is to lose the respect of others. But research suggests that making fun of oneself actually makes us happier. I wonder if it has anything to do with learning from one’s mistakes; whenever I learn from my mistakes, I feel embarrassed about how little I knew before. It makes it easier to laugh at my old self, the version of me that didn’t know any better but who nonetheless felt so sure of himself. Rather than hiding my stammer, I ought to have relaxed and let loose with a few jokes up my sleeve to ease me on my way, I could have said: don’t worry, it’s much worse for you having to listen to it than it is for me trying to say it. Or I could have said: I’m writing a book about stammering, it’s going to be the world’s longest audiobook.

 But I’ve never dared to laugh at my own stammer. I didn’t want to be different, I didn’t want to be like my uncles. On the day of my confirmation in 1995, I used the money I was given to buy a CD player and a copy of *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* by The Smashing Pumpkins, my favourite band at the time. One of Billy Corgan’s songs opens with a line that became a mantra for my generation in the 90s: ‘I fear that I am ordinary / just like everyone’. I never understood what he was getting at, couldn’t comprehend why he would write something like that. The whole notion of being different, the very focus of his song lyrics and an aim for so many, was so unfamiliar to me; I so badly wanted to be ordinary, to be like everyone else. If there had been a line in life that everyone ought to have stood upon, I’d have been there. Not in front of it, not behind it, but right there on it, side by side with everyone else.

14

One technique I employed to conceal my stammer was to avoid presenting anything on stage. Writing books and becoming an author broke with that. I like to think that the desire to speak out became more powerful than the fear of stammering, but more than that, it was about mastering my difficulties – I felt in control. By using the techniques I’d taught myself, I managed to speak in front of people. It made me nervous and the whole process left me exhausted, and sometimes my techniques didn’t work all that well – I may not have stammered, but my way of managing things occasionally got in the way of what I wanted to say – but even so, I didn’t see any reason to make a fuss. Most other people in similar situations were nervous too, and everybody could have a bad day on stage, after all.

 A few months after my first book was published back in autumn 2008, I was invited to present my work at a literary festival in Molde. I had only ever been invited to a few debut author events up until that point, where I’d done little more than mumble into the microphone. This was to be my first appearance at a festival, and the first time I’d be returning to my home county of Møre and Romsdal to discuss my writing.

 Posters around town advertised the names of two local debut authors alongside celebrated writer Vigdis Hjorth. The two local authors in question were myself and Tiger Garté. Tiger was from Sunndalen and his book had been published a year before mine. Vigdis Hjorth was set to introduce us, and would be reading from her own work afterwards.

 I couldn’t eat that day. I felt dizzy and struggled to concentrate on anything. I remember telling myself that what had happened at the school Christmas performance couldn’t be allowed to happen again that day.

 I bumped into one of my old secondary school teachers when I was out and about and he told me he’d always thought I had a way with words.

 A way with words? Words were the thing I’d struggled with more than anything else.

 During the soundcheck half an hour before the event was due to start, I failed to say anything that made any sense. Instead, I concentrated on ensuring I could read from my book. I took deep breaths, found a rhythm and glided over any words than might pose a threat, anything that might cause me to stammer. I didn’t skip them entirely, but I would glide over them in such a way that they would cling to the word that came before them, almost forming one word instead of two.

 Vigdis Hjorth observed me during the soundcheck, and when I finished, she asked: Have you done this before?

 Yes, I replied.

 But you’re feeling a bit nervous, right?

 No, I told her, it’s fine.

 I was in control.

The event itself went fine. I read aloud from my book, barely lifted my gaze. My back was cold with sweat, I did all I could not to stammer as I read my text. When I was finished, I closed the book and mumbled a brief thank you before sitting in my reserved spot in the front row.

 Tiger Garté took to the stage after me and gave a long, explosive monologue before reading from his book. And then Vigdis Hjorth stepped in and did what she does best: she took the stage by storm.

 I didn’t stammer. However, it was obvious that improvements would be necessary. I couldn’t stand there like that with my head in my book, mumbling away to an audience.

 I had to improve.

 So I started practising what I’d say on stage.

 I needed to make sure I had three or four full sentences to hand, sentences without any words that might trip me up. Sentences that wouldn’t cause me to stammer. And then I needed a few additional options in my back pocket, just in case I felt I might stammer while saying the sentences I’d already practised.

 I worked on this at every appearance I made.

 If there were ever any questions, or something happened that I hadn’t planned for, I would reply briefly, curtly, try my best to smile.

 Eventually I landed on a few things that would work for me. I always made sure to have a glass of water to hand so that I could take a sip if I was struggling to get the words out. I remembered to use breathing techniques to help with my fluency. I would always make sure to wear clothing that was sufficiently baggy to disguise the fact that I was shaking, or that my heart was hammering in my chest at record speed. And my clothing had to be dark enough to conceal any sweat patches. I had to position my hands just so every time, and I was careful about what I held in them to prevent anyone from clocking the fact I was trembling. My feet had to be crossed at the ankle to lock them in place and keep them from moving if I did start to stammer, and I had to make sure to look at the person interviewing me or at another specific point elsewhere in the room to make sure I wouldn’t start blinking if the words did become stuck.

 These were the steps I had to take if I were to have the courage to step on stage.

 Even so, that courage still failed me at times.

 I turned down a number of invitations, invented various excuses, told people I would be away at the time of the event, or that I was unwell, or that there were family issues preventing me from attending. On other occasions I would call the evening beforehand and say: I’m so sorry, but I have to cancel tomorrow’s appearance, I’m under the weather, I’ve got the flu.

I like to think that my writing pushed through of its own accord. At primary school, when it was my turn to read aloud, everything would grind to a halt. I would fall silent, pretend that I couldn’t do it, and my teacher told my parents that I was the only one in class who still hadn’t learned to read. My parents couldn’t understand it, back at home they’d heard me read *Huckleberry Finn* from cover to cover. My lips were sealed. But when I wrote, no word or phrase was forbidden to me, nothing flashed bright red. Dad gave me a small notebook in which I wrote a story suspiciously reminiscent of King Solomon’s Mines, a book that had captured my imagination in spite of the librarian who told me she’d happily have thrown it in the bin.

 I did a lot of writing towards the end of my time at high school. My desire to write faded when I began my military conscription, only ever rearing its head every so often, when I would write letters to a friend attending folk high school in Alta.

 When I was twenty years old, I started university and made new friends; I became involved in peace protests against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq at the start of the millennium, first in Bergen, then in Oslo. I frequented cafes, pubs and group study spaces on campus, as well as local relief agency and NGO meeting rooms, and in all of those spaces I would chat away to my heart’s content, but my stammer returned with a vengeance. Not in a way that anyone else would notice, but it became something I battled with on a daily basis. I wanted to speak, I wanted to discuss things, I wanted to shout out loud, but instead I found myself constantly watching my words, keeping in mind what I could and couldn’t say. That feeling took root within me, it formed a knot within my guts, a weight, I didn’t realise it at the time, and I struggled to eat, I couldn’t keep anything down. I became ill, weighed less than 50kg, and I sat there alone and tried to understand what was happening to me.

 It was around this time that I started writing again. Small poems intended for my eyes only to begin with, but they grew longer, and I showed them to Tale, who I’d recently started dating. She told me I ought to apply to study creative writing, and in the spring of 2006, I was awarded a place at Bergen Creative Writing Academy. At around the same time, Tale fell pregnant, and we decided to move from Oslo to Bergen. It felt good to leave everything behind us and start afresh.

 But it wasn’t Oslo that was the problem, it never had been; it was me. My stammer followed me to Bergen, to my new life, to the birth of our child and my studies at Bergen Creative Writing Academy. I couldn’t do it, the problems I couldn’t put into words ate away at me. In the evenings I tended to our newborn baby, I bathed him and held him under the gentle flow of water from the tap, his tiny strands of hair like a whirling maelstrom, I sat up in the night and cradled him in my arms, he wouldn’t sleep when we slept, would only nod off if we walked around with him in the pram, ideally between the hours of four and six o’clock in the morning. And then in typical Bergen fashion it started to rain, and it wouldn’t stop; during one of the last weeks of January 2007, a new rainfall record was set. Tale was at home with our firstborn, who was two months old at the time, and at Bergen Creative Writing Academy we worked on presenting our work to an audience. With the help of a musician who was tasked with setting our texts to music, we rehearsed for an event to be held at the KODE museum of contemporary art in Bergen. We gave each other feedback in class on everything we wrote and submitted, which trained us not only to be critical of our own writing, but also the work of others. When I practised reading my own text set to music in front of the others, I was encouraged to enunciate, to slow down, to emphasise the beginning of each word, to lend them a more explosive nature. I couldn’t do it, or at least I didn’t, because everything they asked of me was exactly what I was trying to avoid doing. They didn’t realise that I spoke the way I spoke and read the way I read in order to avoid revealing my stammer.

 On the day we were due to read our work at KODE, I woke up early. Our son had spent much of the previous night wide awake and had drifted off again around four o’clock in the morning, but even then I had been unable to sleep, instead mulling over how I was going to get through the day. It had been raining for 84 days straight, this was to be the 85th day in a row now, and I was sick of wearing my waterproofs, sick of Bergen, sick of losing sleep and failing at my studies and struggling to get my words out. I bid Tale and our son farewell and left with my umbrella in one hand, my constant companion.

 We lived in Laksevåg, and each morning I would cross the Puddefjord Bridge in order to reach Høyden before making my way into the city centre and out to the peninsula of Nordnes, where Bergen Creative Writing Academy was located.

 As I crossed the bridge that morning, the sky turned black and the rain hammered down. I put up my umbrella and cursed the fact I’d failed to grab my raincoat on the way out of the house.

 I was in the middle of the Puddefjord Bridge when the lightning struck me.

 Even to this day, I remain uncertain about what actually happened and in which order. Initially I felt terrible pain, everything flashed bright white and flames leapt from the hand holding the umbrella. There was a loud bang and I stopped, thought to myself, this is it, I was dead now, surely. I regarded this new world with wonder, it was suspiciously similar to the old one, everything was as it had been before, cars passed by, a bicycle whizzed on past me, two passers-by stepped to one side to avoid bumping into me.

 I must have imagined the whole thing, I thought to myself.

 When I arrived on campus, I received a message from Tale. Had I seen the lightning, had I heard the booming thunder? I took a seat in our seminar room and was about to reply to her message when Erik sat down next to me and asked: What happened to your shoes?

 I glanced down.

 The soles were blistered, as if they had melted.

 I was admitted to Haukeland University Hospital, where doctors queued up to check me out. As I lay there in my hospital bed, more and more doctors and nurses peered at me through the pane of glass in the door, and I heard a passer-by in the corridor outside ask: What’s going on in there?

 It’s the lightning man, someone replied.

 They couldn’t find anything wrong with me and concluded that I had been extremely lucky. The lightning had probably struck the path just beside me before shooting up through my shoes, which would explain why the soles had melted; it had then passed out of my body through my right hand, which had been holding my umbrella. But they couldn’t be certain, they wanted to keep me in for observation. I lay in the corridor until four, five, six, seven o’clock, then I asked to be discharged.

 I’ve got a little boy at home, he’s only two months old, I explained.

 They allowed me to leave, but not before shaving my chest and attaching an ECG monitor, which they asked me to wear for the next few days before returning for a check-up.

 Tale was anxious, she had envisaged a future raising our son as a single parent. My own overwhelming feeling was of relief. Not that I had survived a lightning strike without injury, but that I had avoided having to present my work to an audience.

The following year, my debut short story collection *Driving from Fræna* was published. For the first time since primary school, I wrote in Nynorsk, the lesser used of two official written standards in Norway. I had stopped using Nynorsk at high school, switching instead to using Bokmål in order to be more like the others, to be someone else, someone without a stammer. Bokmål was so standard, so straightforward, there was something anonymous about the language, as if it weren’t Lars Petter writing but someone else altogether. It was what I wanted to be, and it was what I became and remained all through high school, and after arriving in Bergen and Oslo, and after starting at university. Bokmål allowed me to feel as though everything had been erased, I was a blank page, I could create myself anew.

 Later, when I started writing poetry and applied to Bergen Creative Writing Academy, I tried to find a voice that was more unique, more personal, and I started writing in Nynorsk once again, which has always been closer to the way I speak, the way I think. I found my way back to a voice I’d done my very best to forget. *Driving from Fræna* explored everything I had moved away from, but I wrote with a sense of longing because there was something I had lost that I was trying to find once again. I sought it out in short stories about cars and escapes, rage and desperation, short stories about young men constantly attempting to rework sentences, speech, their own stories, to take control of what they showed the world.

 Perhaps that’s why I’ve written this book in Bokmål, to provide some distance. I’ve never had the words to describe my stammer, nor have I had the courage to attempt to do so before now, and there’s barely any trace of it in anything I’ve written. The only time stammering is mentioned is in my novel *Children of God*, published in 2014. In the chapter titled ‘The Firstborn’, we meet a father trying to help his son Jakob with ‘his difficulties with words and the way they get stuck’. In the novel, which takes place at the time of Christ, the father takes his son into the desert to meet Jesus in order that he might be healed. Jakob speaks with Jesus and his stammer disappears. But when we meet Jakob once again later in the novel, his stammer has returned with a vengeance in a chapter titled ‘It Will Not Disappear’:

*When I lurch and stutter and find myself stuck, Noomi says nothing, she simply attempts to hold my gaze. But I look away, I close my eyes, I clasp my hands tight. My entire face tries to do the same as my hands, it tries to grab the words and cast them out. When I eventually finish, Noomi says: Jakob, don’t fight it. I feel furious. What does she know about fighting? What could she possibly know about how it feels not to be able to say something, anything, clearly?*

I had forgotten all about it, but now, reading it back, I can remember writing my own stammer into the novel. It had forced its way out, and I had tried to hide it, to make it small. As I read those words now, I’m taken aback by the image of a man with his hands clasped tight, his face attempting to do the very same thing. It is so precise and so personal, and I always did everything I could not to touch upon anything personal, I avoided it entirely, I tried so hard to leave myself behind when I wrote, and I had forgotten those words were there.