Bjørn Hatterud

Against Normality

Translated from Norwegian
by Martin Aitken

Selected title and supported by NORLA autumn 2020
Represented by Winje Agency, www.winjeagency.com
Contact: gina.winje@gmail.com

Mum and I are in Krakow. It's the sixth time we've gone on holiday together, the two of us on our own. We prefer Eastern Europe, you get more for your money there. We go slowly through the streets, Mum with her trekking poles, me with a walking stick. Short stretches at a time, from café to café, churches to parks.

Dad doesn't mind Mum spending their savings on holidays. In fact, he's quite happy about it. Mum loves to go abroad. Dad and me have both done more travelling than has ever been possible for her.

When I was a kid, she used to collect miniature houses. There was a whole village of them, little ceramic houses on a shelf in the brown 1970s unit we had. They were souvenirs that had been bought by my maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbours. Little half-timbered houses from England, hand-painted cottages from Greece, Spanish houses, houses from Eastern Europe, from the entire world. And in the midst of them all, a tiny Eiffel Tower I'd bought for my own money in Paris.

Now I wonder if that shelf had been a kind of substitute for her not having been anywhere herself. Seeing the world is easy when it's all on a shelf. We never really went anywhere when I was a boy. Going places costs money.

We had absolutely everything when I was a kid, apart from money.

We sit down for a rest in a dark cathedral, the interior lit only by the sun filtering in through a Baroque window of stained glass. A class of schoolchildren spills in through the wide brick entrance like a game of marbles. Mum considers them. She worked for some years as a teaching assistant when I was growing up, and later took the proper qualifications.

‘Children find visiting churches and museums so dull,’ she says.

‘I always enjoyed it when I was a kid,’ I tell her.

‘Yes, but you were never like the others,’ she says.

It could have gone so terribly wrong. I almost didn't make it. I was so big they told Mum it looked like twins. Fifty-six centimetres in length and weighing in at 4.76 kilograms. Mum was only 1.63 metres tall herself. Compared to my diminutive mother, I was a great big lump. They could hardly get me out. Mum was on laughing gas and painkillers. The consultant came to lend a hand. Hours passed. The midwife who was on duty wouldn't go home when her shift ended, so with the new one there were two. Nurses came in increasing numbers. Despair kicked in. It wasn't looking good for either of us. Eventually, a whole group of student nurses were waved in to stand and gawp as my mum lay screaming and writhing and, for all anyone knew, dying. Maybe both of us were dying? Dying in labour wasn't that common anymore in 1977. This was a potentially instructive experience for all of us.

Sheer manhandling saved our lives. One of the midwives got a grip under one of my arms and heaved as hard as she could, while her bigger colleague threw herself down with all her weight on my mum's abdomen. It was a potentially lethal manoeuvre, but there was no other way. It was all or nothing. My arm broke. My face got squashed flat, a wrinkled pudding bearing little or no resemblance to anything human.

My mum was broken for life. I'm not really sure of the details. But she's never been able to climb onto a chair since. My arm, of course, grew back together.

Anyone would think I'd be traumatised for life after that, but the events of my birth merely set a standard for what was to come.

How did people get to meet before there was internet?

Mum and her friend Marit were sixteen years old and staying a few days at a cabin at Ljøsheim in the Ringsaker hills.

They'd heard from someone they met that there was going to be a party at a cabin the Hatterud family owned. Marit and my mum plucked up the courage, did themselves up and negotiated the heather and scrub to the Hatterud's place just up the hill. That was where they met. Mum and Dad. They had a few drinks and a good laugh together, and just clicked.

Later that summer, they ran into each other again by accident at a fete ground in Veldre, the village community where I would later grow up. Mum was still sixteen, Dad had just turned twenty-one. As Mum tells it, she felt quite mature enough to settle down, there was nothing more she needed out of life. In her eyes, Dad was an old codger, worn out and ready for an easier life. He had a trade as well. Four years he'd spent learning to be a mechanic after his seven years of school. Mum had eight years of school and was serving in a baker's shop in Brumunddal. They danced with each other that night, and from then on they were a couple.

The fete ground was known as *Aslasletta*, a flat patch of land belonging to Asla's farm. My maternal grandfather had been born into poor circumstances in 1914, on a smallholding called *Aslabakken*, belonging to the same farm. He'd been born only a few hundred metres from where my mum and dad would dance together at that fete, fifty-four years on. My dad's parents were from the Rognstad farm, only a few kilometres to the east of the village.

Dad was driving that night in 1968, an Opel Kadett he'd borrowed from his younger brother, Arne. He offered to drive Mum home from the fete. She lived with her parents only a short walk away, but since they were now a couple, it was only fitting for her to be driven home in a car.

On the way there, Dad made a little detour. He wanted to pick up his parents from a do they were at before dropping Mum off. Mum and Dad were already decided that they were right for each other. So it was only logical that Dad's parents should meet their future daughter-in-law as soon as possible, that very night.

My paternal grandparents were at a fiftieth birthday bash at the home of the lorry driver Even Lund that night. My maternal grandparents were there too. Both sets of future grandparents at the same birthday party. Even Lund was a workmate, neighbour and good friend of my mum's father. Even Lund's daughter, Margot, was married to Dad's older brother Arne. What's more, the future maternal grandfather knew my paternal grandfather's family well from coming to collect the animals for slaughter at the farm my dad was from.

So everyone knew each other already, and neither family had the slightest hesitation in approving of the match. Two lines of descendants came together that night, two family mythologies joined and became one. Nine years later, this became manifest in the form of me.

Mum and Dad meeting that night at the family's cabin at Ljøsheim was what kicked off my whole life story.

Mum and I phone each other whenever there's a health programme on TV. We watch the programme together in our different living rooms and comment on it afterwards, in text messages or over the phone. When I'm at home in Veldre, the channels we watch tend to be channels like TLC or Fem. Women's channels, mainly. All health and lifestyle.

Mum and Dad have invested in a pair of decent chairs, Stressless recliners made for TV-watching. In the late evenings when Dad's gone to bed, usually around ten o'clock, Mum can have her pick of the programmes. And then it's me and her, in front of the TV. Generally, she opts for blood and gore. We butter ourselves some sandwiches, two shrimp salad for me, one cheese and fish roe for Mum, before settling in to binge out on accident and emergency, plastic disasters, or one of the many programmes on weight loss surgery. We stare at the screen as people are opened up. A world of fat, organs and blood, doctors and nurses in white or green surgical wear, hands in latex gloves. We comment on what we see, and have a wonderful time together.

It was clear at an early stage that something was wrong with me. The doctors thought it might be hip dysplasia, so they splayed my little legs with a special harness, forcing them further and further apart until they stood out at right angles on both sides, bent at the knees.

In those days, it was thought children were better off on their own when they were in hospital, away from their parents. I was about one year old and was being treated by a hip specialist at Hamar. I lay there, unable to move, and my mother could hear my screams all the way out in the car park, where she was supposed to just get into our VW Golf and drive home. But she couldn't leave me. She came back in to get me, and I had to suffer the pain of the treatment at home.

I wasn't developing normally. For instance, I didn't learn to walk until I was two years old. I could chatter away all day long, seek contact the way a child is supposed to, and even sing in tune. But I couldn't stand on my own two legs. When finally I did learn to walk, it was obvious I wasn't doing it right. I kept teetering and falling over. Besides that, I had a large lump at the bottom of my spine. Mum took me back to the hip specialist. He insisted sternly that everything was fine:

'As you can hear, Mrs Hatterud, when the boy walks, the sound he makes is a *tip-tap-tip-tap*. As opposed to a *tippety-tap-tippety-tap*. In other words, there's nothing wrong with the little fellow.'

And with that we were sent home.

A year or two later, after much insistence on Mum's part, I was examined at Sophies Minde, the orthopaedic hospital in Oslo. There I was diagnosed with clubfoot, for which until then I'd received no treatment. It's a condition that requires the earliest possible correction. Instead, I'd been living with it for some time. My pelvis was skewed as well, and my legs were measured to be of different length, the right leg, the one with clubfoot, being shorter than the left. As I'd grown, the disparity had become increasingly pronounced and was now some three and a half centimetres.

The doctor measured the difference by clenching his fist hard around my pelvis and hips while I stood in my bare feet, my right foot on some stacked wooden boards. I remember the cold surface of the wood against the sole of my foot.

To straighten me up I was provided with orthopaedic footwear, the built-up sole of the right shoe being much thicker than the ordinary one on the left. My orthopaedic shoe worked like an advertisement, telling everyone that I was disabled.

In those days, I could still wear normal shoes, which we bought at Ulven's in Brumunddal, an outfitter's shop where Mum and Dad and my grandfather too were regular customers. The make I wore was called Turbo, a much cheaper alternative to the more popular brands when it came to trainers. With only one income, Mum and Dad weren't that well off. Apart from my legs being of different length, my feet are too, meaning that in order to fit me out with a pair of shoes we'd have to buy two pairs and match the right and left shoe from each.

For years, we kept the wrong-sized shoes in the wardrobe in the forlorn hope that someone out there would turn out to have feet that were the exact opposite of mine.

Mum and Dad still live in my childhood home in Byflaten, the hub of the community of Veldre, north of Brumunddal. A hundred and forty kilometres north of Oslo, but in every other respect as far as you can imagine from the city. Byflaten takes its name from a smallholding that once belonged to the farm named By. These days, it's my brother who owns the house that occupies the site of that smallholding. His windows afford the most amazing panorama view of Lake Mjøsa.

From the late 1800s, Byflaten was a busy little junction where the main roads running between Brumunddal, Ringsaker hills and Rudshøgda intersected, making Byflaten a local midpoint of sorts as a wave of modernisation swept through the land in the latter nineteenth century. The most significant shift to occur at that time was that a lot more produce went from the farms to be processed and sold, instead of people being self-sufficient or reliant on mutual exchange and barter. It was a time of upheaval, and great divides opened up between the new age and the old. Those who worked on the farms received money for their labour, rather than simply board and lodging, and the farm-owning families, as well as those who worked for them, became consumers, purchasing the goods they required.

On the initiative of the local pastor, Reinert Svendsen, an old people's home was built. A local shop was turned into a co-op, a great-grandfather of mine being one of the first to be involved in the venture. Some eighty years later, Dad's younger brother, my uncle Arne, played a part in that co-op being closed down. A prayer house was established too, likewise on Pastor Svendsen's initiative. The capital required for this house of faith was raised by holding fetes and raffles.

When the Kirkekretsen Skole was built in 1917, Byflaten finally had a decent school. And with the community hall called Veldrom, right next door to the school, the youngsters had a place to meet for dancing and other diversions.

When I was a little boy, Veldre was still a living community, with a shop, an old people's home, a school, a petrol station, a post office, a library, a telephone box, a prayer house, a nursery school. It was a strong community in those days. They put benches out for people in spring and made sure there were flowers in the central reservations. Maybe that was part of why people always used to sit out in the village, it was a place conducive to sitting about and enjoying the good life. The community I grew up in had something to offer, a social life, it was a place where people talked to each other. People were outside much of the day: teenagers hung about drinking pop or smoking, old people sat with their snuff and tobacco, mopeds whined in car parks. The village was where to go for the latest news and gossip.

The cars in the car park outside the shop would be left open with their engines turning over, if their owners just needed to pop in for something. Everyone knew each other in Veldre, and you only ever locked your front door if you were going away. Even then, the key would be left out in full view, in case the neighbours ran out of coffee or needed to borrow the phone or some such thing. If we'd just gone out locally, the key would be left in the lock. That way, anyone who came by would know that we'd be back before long, and that they could go inside and wait if they wanted.

Everyone had their own role in the social scheme of things. Gunnar Kjerringsveen, with his glass eye and only the thumbs left on his hands after an accident with some explosives, worked as a scrap merchant for decades. Another guy, Krølle, used to hang out with the young lads, despite being at least fifty, without there being anything suspect about it. He just shared their sense of humour, that was all.

Then there was the old bloke with his blue invalid carriage and artificial leg. A friend of my mum's found his leg sticking up from a ditch at the side of the road one day. He'd taken a bend too fast and hadn't noticed his leg had come off. Nothing bothered him much. At one point, he was building a new house, and started with the shed. When the shed was up, he just moved in there. Every spring he'd build himself a new fence. As soon as autumn came, he'd chop it up for firewood.

The local kleptomaniac was known to everyone, including those who worked in the shop. She was a woman going on ninety, and she was so slow about it, her arms so weak and her eyesight so poor, that it was plain to everyone what she was doing, stuffing her cardie with cigarettes and chocolate. It was a shrinkage of stock the owners of the co-op, which is to say the community itself, would never have dreamed of getting worked up about. It was what she did, her role.

That's what life was like there, for a few decades. Then, as if consumed by some sudden, cultural forest fire, everything bar the old people's home, the nursery school and the school shut down, all in the space of ten years. The library is gone now, the phone box is gone, the post office is gone, even the prayer house was sold off and is now a private home. The petrol station and the co-op have been converted into a large, cost-saving institution for children of pre-school age. The old people's home is now flats for the elderly. The social club has shut down. Benches and flowers are no more. People sitting out and enjoying their community is a thing of the past. Byflaten is no longer a hub for anything.

Apart from the school, there's only one building left with the same function as when I was a kid, and that's the Veldrom community hall. Mum and Dad held their wedding reception at Veldrom. Veldrom was the first place I got drunk. Veldrom was where we held the wakes for three of my grandparents, and one of my uncles.

Veldrom is a typical Norwegian community hall, about a hundred metres from my childhood home. Stained brown wooden cladding on the exterior, small-paned windows, log-wall interior, a white flagpole outside, the Norwegian flag on high on public holidays, at half-mast for wakes.

Norway used to be dotted with communities like Veldre. Often, they lay centred around a junction. There are lots of roads that cross through the Ringsaker district to which Veldre belongs, and therefore there were lots of communities whose shops were to be found at their intersections. These communities are gone now, many of them disappearing in the space of only a few short years. Åsmarka, Lismarka, Gaupen and Brumund have all withered away and shrunk back into a dormitory existence. And these are just a few of the communities in the municipality in which I grew up. Every rural municipality in the country has places like them. And in each, a social way of life has died.

When I was a kid, Brumunddal was somewhere else altogether. I grew up in the community of Veldre. Almost in the very centre.

I spent my childhood's most formative years there. I lived there until I was twenty-one. I'm forty-two now. I've lived almost half my life away from that community. My family still lives there. Three of my four grandparents were from there. Many gravestones in the churchyard there bear my family's name.

The nicest thing I knew when I was little was Dad carrying me upstairs to bed. Every evening at bedtime he would carry me upstairs to bed, until one day it stopped.

Such is life. One day you're too little, the next you're too big. The tiny gap in between, where we're just right, evades us.

Growing up is nothing special, it's what happens. But in my case I was growing all wrong. We disabled have bodies bulging with all manner of lumps and nodules, growths and protuberances. Like trees our trunks are knotted and gnarled, our limbs are wizened, our tops are stunted, our roots grow upwards from the ground. Magnificent specimens we are not. Enter the health service then, to hammer and saw, and trim and shape, to graft bits on and take others away, to prop us up and fertilise our soil, all in the hope that everything will rectify itself. That we will become a tree like any other and not stick out in the forest. For large swathes of my life, my body has been the object of much fitting and fixing. Growths on my spine have been removed, my foot was straightened and immobilised, I've been cut open and sewn together, put in plaster casts, and medicated; I've been blood-tested and X-rayed, CT-scanned, MR-scanned, urine-tested, stretched and put into traction, massaged and trained. Gradually, my body became an amalgamation of anomalies, a storage point of pain and desolation. This was what I grew into. And at some point, Dad stopped carrying me upstairs at bedtime.

A combination of spinal complications and clubfoot comes with all sorts of bonuses. As anyone with a body like mine will tell you, insecurity is one of them. You never know what's going to happen, and can't plan things the way other people do. I've often suffered from sores on my foot, sometimes they've become infected. I've had pyelitis, a bacterial infection of the renal pelvis. I've shuddered and shivered with explosive, hot and cold fevers in various waiting rooms, nauseous to boot. In winter especially, I've tended to ail. Instead of a family Christmas back home, I've languished on a ward at the hospital in Hamar. Instead of Christmas in our cabin in the hills, I've been consigned to a ward in Lillehammer. I've been carted away by ambulances from my home in Oslo.

Our lives exist in the body and the spaces in which we move – the home, the family, work, our familiar geographical locations, or the places we go for our holidays. The narrative tapestries of our lives are a function of this. Sometimes, the criss-crossing threads in our tapestries are especially plain to us, like the last time you were carried up to bed by your Dad.

Living apart from your closest family sometimes feels like an anomaly. Moving away from the family history can feel like letting the side down. I grew up in a small rural community. Anyone who moved there was a newcomer even decades later, and anyone who moved away would likewise remain a subject of conversation for a very long time afterwards, just for moving away. For years, I felt guilty about not having a proper job of work. From the outside, I was someone swanning about in Oslo, going to meetings, dining out with people with fancy titles who'd never done a day's work in their lives. Someone who was paid money to write about other people's lives. For a long time, I was terrified I'd be seen as the sort who deigned to come back and bestow a visit with his nose in the air. Someone who looked down on the people he'd moved away from.

I'm still scared of that.

I've sometimes toyed with the idea of living close to my family again, in the place I was born, the scene of my family history, in the region called Hedemarken. I've imagined a life there that I think I'd be able to live.

It's a vision that has me living in a small house of my own in one of the villages near Lake Mjøsa, a short drive from Mum and Dad's. I shuffle about on a nice wooden floor, hobble down to the letter box to see if there's any post, perhaps potter about in my own little vegetable garden. An ordinary life in a rural idyll where people wave and stop to say hello. The good life, in a community like the one I grew up in. The way I remember it.

Utopia for me is nothing to do with a shiny life in some futuristic city, but a little house, in a little community in the country. A place where I can feel harmony. Where it isn't painful for me to fill up the car with petrol. Where I can be like everyone else. With no friction.

There's something wistfully backward-looking about all this, of course And is the person in the daydream really me?

Driving between Oslo and my childhood home, I always feel myself caught between two places. It's like being tongue-tied in a way. Am I going home when I'm driving back to my flat in Oslo? Or am I going home when I'm driving back to the place I grew up?

If a person feels deeply rooted in a place, but lives somewhere else, then to a certain extent they'll have two identities. My childhood home is still a home to me – even though I spend most of my time in a different home now. My Oslo home is the place where I fill the fridge, stock up on loo paper, eat, read, watch TV, sleep. The place that gives me a feeling of lasting identity, tradition and continuity, is Veldre.

Dad feels guilty about not having been there enough when my brother and I were little. He was an agricultural mechanic, and he was at work at the former military airbase at Gardermoen when Mum gave birth to me. He couldn't just take time off.

He'd leave home at six in the morning and often wouldn't be back until late evening. The skin of his hands cracked in the cold. Chemicals gave him sores. He was always nursing some minor injury or other, sustained from the tools or materials he had to work with. It was a physical job with lots of heavy lifting. And it was lonely too, on his own in the cold with his aches and pains. For a couple of years in the seventies he'd had enough and switched to fitting out stables. He worked in clouds of asbestos, he told us, with no protection. Later he went back to repairing tractors.

Dad was a mechanic until I was nine years old, but carried on fixing engines long after that. He felt he had to, to keep up contacts with potential customers. He travelled about selling tractors at that time. Kitted out with business cards, a mobile phone and a briefcase. He was given the title of sales consultant. But he was still on his back in the muck, fixing engines.

My class background has always been a kind of resonance box, amplifying my physical disabilities. Had Dad not been a manual worker, with a sum total of ten years of schooling, perhaps Mum wouldn't have been on her own when I was born.

Mum had long since finished school then. She didn't take her qualifications to work with kids until she was in her late forties. If she hadn't come from the kind of class background she did, unversed in the languages of professional communication, then perhaps the exchanges that took place between her and the doctors when I was a small boy might have been easier and more open.

I remember seeing a consultant at Oslo's *Rikshospital* when I was five or six years old, about the lump on my back. His office door was padded on the inside. He reclined commandingly in a large, accommodating chair behind a dark, stately-looking desk. Mum and I sat before him on simple stacking chairs. I didn't understand much of what was going on, other than that the doctor and my mum were extremely irritated by each other. I can't help thinking that a lot of information must have been gone by the board in both directions. It was like a kind of trench warfare going on above my head. Encounters with authority are a different thing entirely when you master the language of power. Instead of when everything stalls in abstractions, quotes and references provoke empty looks, and terminology presents a seemingly insurmountable stumbling block.

And it's not only the spoken language that's affected by class, body language is too. You can't come from where I come from and not hold your head bowed, your eyes obliquely downcast, as if in deference. Generations of powerful class discrepancies have made class a category in whose confines we must live, according to its particular laws – as well as being something we must struggle against.

If everything keeps telling you you're not good enough, it'll show in the way you hold yourself. If you keep having to endure unpleasant experiences that wouldn't have happened if you'd come from a more affluent background, it'll leave its mark on you. Through generations, and through decades of time, that's going to exert an influence, on your language, and on your body.

I'm in the front room at home. I'm maybe five years old, dancing around to the music of Baccara. Mum and Dad didn't have much money, but they did splash out on a good stereo.

This is before my weight went up, before I stopped being able to walk and underwent my first surgery. I feel an intense sense of joy. My body and I are one. To this day, the sound of the Spanish disco duo Baccara, a poor man's ABBA put together by the German producer Rolf Soja, is magical to me. Slippers on brown needle-felt carpet, everlasting days whiled away in tranquillity indoors.

I was let off going to pre-school between the ages of one and six. My days were spent with Mum, a housewife then and always home, my maternal grandmother who'd pop in on us, and my older brother. I'd go with my mum whenever she went to see someone, and sit and listen to the grown-ups talking. I wasn't that keen on playing out, and there were a lot of things I couldn't do because of my leg. I taught myself to read and immersed myself in a world of comics, newspapers and books. My brother was outside a lot more than me. He went to pre-school when he was five, attended Sunday school, biked around the village and played at the houses of his friends. I was at home a lot.

I was far too big to wear a nappy, only I wet myself every day. T-Nappy was the brand we used. They were so bulky I could hardly get my trousers on. I wore them the wrong way round, the broader part that was meant for poo facing front. As time went on, my bladder became ever leakier, and eventually I couldn't control my sphincter at all. At the same time, I gradually lost the ability to walk. My legs just wouldn't carry me anymore. I was in a lot of pain too. I remember Dad having to carry me back to the car after visiting my grandparents after my legs gave way. Mum pestered the doctors, and shortly before my sixth birthday in 1983 they put me through the CT scanner at Sophies Minde, a rattling excursion in a kind of retro-futuristic washing machine. The doctors at the hospital there were worried it was something neurological that was wrong with me. That the lump on my spine could be a sign of something worse, something deeper lying and a lot more sinister. The CT scan gave them their answer. I was born with a rare spina bifida condition in which a tumour of fibrous, fatty tissue, a lipoma, projects through the protective membranes into the spinal cord through an opening in the spine, causing a great deal of damage. The lipoma was the lump I had on my back. Furthermore, it was attached by a cord to the base of the spinal canal, what they called a tethered cord. This, in tandem with the fatty lump that had intruded into the spinal cord, meant that as I grew, the spinal cord became impacted and gradually succumbed to nervous damage. If nothing had been done, this would have got worse. A conceivable scenario without surgery would have been complete paralysis of the legs and body and the cerebellum being pulled downwards in the skull. As soon as the radiologists and neurologists saw the scan, I was whisked off for surgery at the Rikshospital. I was an emergency case. The operation was conducted by paediatric neurosurgeon Kalle Hovin. Hovin was sixty years old at the time and had come from the best neurosurgical schooling in the world, in Boston. At that time, in 1972, only eleven years before my first operation, Norway had no paediatric neurosurgical environment of which to speak. Hovin changed that, setting up a team at the Rikshospital.

The man was a legend among his peers, and to this day he remains lauded by neurologists and neurosurgeons alike. Until the late 1960s, spina bifida children were left to die. There was nothing to be done, the expertise just wasn't there, and there was certainly little hope that anything could ever become of those poor, deformed infants. Thanks to the efforts of Kalle Hovin, my own life was saved and I even learned to walk again.

Dissected by scalpels, the cold instruments of surgery at work inside my little body, I lay on his operating table with my life in his hands. I was six years old, and the procedure took six hours. They had me on my feet as soon as I got back from observation. The day after surgery I was walking about singing. A doctor by the name of Dahl aimed a playful kick at my behind as I passed him in the corridor. I pretended to be aghast, but thought it was great. They treated me like a hero on the ward. I was the little guy who'd come through complicated surgery for open spina bifida, during which his spinal canal had been closed and the tethered cord released. The chirpy lad whose life had been saved and who was now up and about, with no sensory loss and no negative effect on motor control or mobility. These issues wouldn't crop up until later. But for the meantime I went about the children's ward listening to music on my Walkman, singing along and feeling very proud of myself indeed.

By the time I started pre-school, a couple of months had gone by since I'd been through surgery. At pre-school, I played doctors and nurses. The teachers were concerned I'd got something sexual going on. They took the matter up with Mum. But all I was doing was verbalising what had happened to me, talking about my body, the nurses, syringes and blood tests, anaesthesia, wounds, stitches and X-rays. Something happened in my sixth year. I put on lots of weight, many kilograms. The operation I had when I was six left its mark in such a way that my body seemed to lose its self-security after having been cut open and roughed up like that. It was as if the scalpel opened up a new and darker space inside me. I started pre-school and mirrored myself socially in children I hadn't known until then, who weren't from the usual circles of friends or family. I found myself thrown in at the deep end, into a whole new world, with new parameters and different points of reference.

But of course, as a five-year-old prior to surgery, I was oblivious to all of this. The world was safe and secure, and my senses opened wide to the gorgeous harmonies of Baccara.

Slippers shuffling and sliding on a needle-felt carpet.

[…] Page 1 – 12 in the Norwegian manuscript.

From page 53 - 54 in the Norwegian manuscript

As a child, I developed a thing about eccentrics, and dreamt of becoming one when I grew up. I discovered the Dadaists and Salvador Dalí. I loved the avant-garde, the absurd, the bizarre, the curious, the downright tasteless. I loved anything that wasn't streamlined. When at the age of fourteen I happened upon Jan Erik Vold's prose at the school library, I felt I'd been saved. At the same time, I was mad about Mae West, John Waters, road movies, Twin Peaks, Vivienne Westwood, Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Woody Allen, Sixties psychedelia – anything that held the promise of alternative ways of living.

The queen of all this for me was Yoko Ono. She flaunted every rule and was so free in everything she did! She'd been vilified for her art and music, but carried on regardless. I had a cassette tape of some of her songs from her collaborative albums with John Lennon. I always fast-forwarded Lennon, preferring her music to his. I still have that cassette.

If only I could be like Yoko Ono. When I was fifteen, she came to Norway. I read about it in the newspaper. I obsessed about making the trip to see her at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, perhaps there'd even be a chance to meet her. But there was no way I could go to Oslo on my own.

I was seventeen before I saw my first art exhibition: Andy Warhol at that same gallery. My Uncle Tor gave me a lift in his lorry. He was going that way anyway, and picked me up again on his way home.

The source of my knowledge of all these idols was an occasional trickle from NRK, the Norwegian public broadcasting company, and the tabloid newspaper VG (which I began buying with my pocket-money when I was twelve). The local library was important here too, as was the encyclopaedia we kept on the shelf at home. No one else knew anything about that kind of thing, and they'd never heard of the people I mentioned. Apart from my mum, that is, who would listen to me going on about them for ages. It seemed like she could listen for hours whenever I got going about those weird and wonderful characters and all the things I'd been reading about them. She would laugh as well, in all the right places, and was so glad I'd found myself some idols to accompany me towards adulthood. For like them, I too stood out from the rest.

My experience of moving to Oslo, of stepping into student life and the gay scene there, couldn't have been more unlike the way Édouard Louis describes his own entry into independent existence in his autobiographical novel *The End of Eddy*. The main character in that book renounces his working-class background to lead a gay life as he sees fit, finding in the sensitive men of the Parisian middle class a sense of belonging, discovering himself in the coming together of gay and academic life.

In my case, the opposite was true. My body language was working-class all over, whether I liked it or not. Joining Oslo's gay scene, I felt like an outsider the way I carried myself.

As gay men go, I'm pretty nondescript, less than feminine, and my working-class ways serve only to conceal my sexuality. I was never graceful or thin, never the jaunty guy in an ironed shirt. More than once, I got stopped at the door of gay clubs abroad and told I'd come to the wrong place. At parties in Oslo, people would comment favourably on how unprejudiced I was, hanging out with my gay friends.

A body ravaged by surgery and racked with pain, under continuing medical treatment, wasn't worth much at the meat market, where the brain belongs to the offal, as Nils-Fredrik Nielsen once put it. I'd dither about on the fringes, not really knowing what to do with myself. Adapting wasn't really an option.

It was much the same story on campus. My language was all wrong for academia. My body didn't really fit either – it spoke the wrong lingo too. I felt stupid and out of place, until after the foundation year I started on the cultural history course. It laid out structures and taught me theories that could explain how cultural classes arise. My background was suddenly a major plus, because I'd lived the theory in real life. Studying cultural history gave me an academic identity.

In the same way that my partially suppressed dialect comes out when I'm feeling relaxed or emotionally engaged, my working-class body language kicks in too. An ungraceful vernacular made for work, tough experiences and social hurt.

My dialect and sociolect are latent forms within me. Although I've become a lot better at talking the talk of arts and culture, the accents I developed in childhood still come through now and again. I'll switch then to a kind of physical dialect that no doubt comes across as anything but proper and appropriate –perhaps even arrogant.

Body language is one of the most difficult languages of all. The body's native tongue lies quiet and dormant, to suddenly come to life as soon as I lose control of the conversation.

[…]

From page 61 – 65 in the manuscript, the last 4 pages

I haven't got kids.

If people don't know I'm gay and ask if I've got kids, I sometimes joke about it. I tell them my partner and I sadly can't have any. That we've tried and tried. The person I'm talking to will look at me pityingly, before I break the gloom and explain to them that my partner, Peder, lacks a requisite part called a womb. They laugh then, sheepishly, and don't know where to put themselves. It's a privilege gay people have, making others feel awkward about them.

Childlessness is no laughing matter, people get so worked up about it. I'm voluntarily childless. At least I think I am. Which is to say, I wouldn't have had kids if I'd had a female partner either. At least I don't think I would. I've never really considered it that much.

Several of my disabilities are genetic and thereby hereditary. Besides, my family history is full of diabetes, cancer, dodgy tickers and premature senility, not to mention a smattering of mental ill-health. I like to refer to myself as a hobbling pile of genetic dross. A complicated soul in a complicated body. Disseminating these properties has never struck me as imperative. And anyway, I'm lazy. For example, the reason I never started smoking was that I couldn't be bothered. There was never a potted plant I could keep alive. I think of myself as a branch of the family tree that never led anywhere, but disappeared in Oslo.

An internist I saw when I was in my late twenties looked me deep in the eye, after looking even deeper into the wall. I'd been telling him my problems for a quite a while. His eyes were sad as he summed up what I'd said, along with the contents of my rather fat journal:

'You've had a fragile life.'

My twenties were a hard time for me. My physical therapy took up a large portion of my life, and my culture studies at the university were now part-time. I did what I could to find a way into the job market, but there wasn't much call for someone who was physically impaired and whose work capacity was wavering at best.

By the time I was thirty, I'd been put on disability benefit. The letter came in the post and spiralled me into severe depression. At the same time, I was determined to keep on going. Life was endless hours of physiotherapy and training exercises, years of psychotherapy. I took Valium in order to sleep, and gritted my teeth through pain, injury, anxiety. The advantage of disability benefit is that you can spend as much time as you can manage doing something you like, and still get by financially. Instead of stretching myself to try and counteract my disabilities, I started working with what I had. I began to write, and taught myself to play electronic instruments. I immersed myself in the visual arts. I pushed myself, sometimes more than my body could handle. I had a past to shake off, a self-image that needed fixing. In sheer desperation at being so useless, I went off in several directions at once. If I wasn't being put through my paces by my physio or my psychotherapist, and if I wasn't flat out in pain, I worked creatively – to forge a kind of career.

I used an online LGBTQ dating site to find a boyfriend, the farmer's son I'm still together with. The site is a queer haven, and it put me in touch with all sorts of people in arts and culture, from established writers and academics to young artists on the up and up. Being gay meant there was a network there for me that could help me on my way. Online sessions with the right people helped me develop my writing skills. I started to write about being different. I wrote about being gay and not fitting in. About disability and the stigmatisation of working-class culture. It turned out there was a market for writing that dealt with the problems of being different, and my work was picked up by editors of journals, magazines and newspapers. What I was writing gained attention. My pieces about the body, disability and sexuality sparked lengthy debate in newspapers. They were referenced in parliament, in national exams, in textbooks on ethics, and in several doctoral dissertations. Articles about the working class, the use of dialect, the culture of motoring, popular tastes in home interiors, were followed by interviews on the radio, in newspapers and magazines. A piece I did about boy racers ended up on the curriculum of a university MA course. I'm only a BA myself.

Being different gave me power of definition. I was asked to join the Norwegian Critics' Association and Norwegian PEN, as well as an association of nonfiction writers and translators. In the visual arts field, which especially attracted me because of the freedom I saw there, my class background and minority experiences gave me valuable angles of approach. I found myself working with artists who were in every way as eccentric as the ones I'd looked up to as a kid. I ventured into criticism, and increasingly I was asked to contribute pieces to exhibition catalogues. From there it seemed like only a short step and I was picking out works for exhibitions myself. I'd become an art curator. The exhibitions I've curated have usually caused a stir, seen perhaps to be original and different. One, on the theme of queer culture, was opened by the Norwegian crown princess, Mette-Marit. The press were out in force at the opening, and I was photographed with Her Royal Highness for one of the glossy weeklies. Mum's friend in Brumunddal told her they'd seen my picture.

While still a student I began making my own experimental music, mixing the sounds of the lowbrow culture with which I'd grown up with other sounds inspired by the avant-garde artists I'd always loved. The recordings I made were given titles referencing homosexuality, disability and working-class culture. The music I was making slotted neatly into the Noise scene that was happening in Oslo at the time, where classically trained composers, ageing punks, jazz musicians and sundry other outsiders all came together in a love of everything that was esoteric, outlandish, or just plain weird. I was received with warmth and acceptance. The more offbeat a person was, the more idiosyncratic the music they made, the more it seemed they were loved. I've put out experimental music in perhaps fifteen different countries. An album I made with Conrad Schnitzler, a longstanding hero of mine from the German experimental scene, was hailed as album of the year by one of the Norwegian dailies. Another gave it a six-star review. I've performed at Oslo's major Øyafestivalen, and one of my off-centre songs featured as a pick of the week on national radio. I've also been included in a reference book documenting the history of Norwegian electronic music.

Bit by bit, the perception I had of myself changed as I developed a career of sorts as a professional outsider.

I don't get much disability benefit these days, although I'm still disabled and entitled to help from social security. I earn too much money on my own now, from my own projects, for the benefits to kick in. As from January 1, 2020, I've been appointed by the King in Cabinet as a deputy member of the Norwegian Arts Council. You may be forgiven for thinking hell has frozen over and that pigs can fly.

I'm on the top floor of the biggest hotel in Reykjavik, a couple of months after my thirty-fourth birthday. All around me there's a buzz of photographers, TV people and journalists. The mood where we're sitting, in the corridor by the lifts, is restless and excited. All eyes are on the glass doors of the panorama lounge, where in front of the windows, looking out on fjords and mountains, a temporary TV studio has been set up, a single chair and mic stand centred in a glare of lights.

I'm sweaty and nervous, and clutch in my hand some loose sheets of paper on which I've written some questions down. In the pocket of my hoodie is an old mix tape I recorded when I was still a teenager, just to remind me why I'm here.

A photographer who has flown in from the UK tells me that a couple of weeks earlier he photographed Queen Elizabeth. It felt like a big thing at the time, but this is bigger, he says. We exchange some words of mutual encouragement. She can't be as moody as people make out.

It's my turn before his. I get to my feet and pass through the assembled media in the corridor. An assistant leads me into the lounge, past the TV studio and further inside. Tucked away in a corner, a couple of two-seater sofas have been placed. It could almost be someone's front room.

Another assistant says that since I'm disabled they'd like to make sure I'm seated comfortably during the interview. While the others before me have had to perch on hard chairs, in the glare of a spotlight, I've been assigned this cosy little nook. The assistant asks if I'm okay. I say I'm fine. It's turned out to be a hard day for everyone. The interviews so far haven't been good. Apparently, she's not in the mood today.

Her people look strained. There's a huge set-up around her, a personal archivist, a curator, a visual PR exec, miscellaneous assistants.

A hectic discussion goes on as to where she's got to. Surely she can't have slipped out the back way and returned to her room? Things people have said about her flash through my mind. She's a bitch, they say. All of a sudden, the room is a flurry of activity. She's here. Assistants buzzing around her, a tiny Japanese woman in her late seventies. From beneath her hat, over the top of her signature shades, she glares at me harshly, a look of exasperation and annoyance. She sits down to face me, barely a metre away. 'Don't expect me to give you what you want,' she says firmly. I look at her eyes. The person I see there isn't a bitch, but a woman traumatised: I am she, say the eyes, bullied, slandered and ostracised since the 1960s; I am she, who saw my husband slain in front of me on a New York street, December 8, 1980.

I put my first questions to her, referencing obscure B-sides of singles, forgotten video installations, elements of her poetry. Her shield comes down. Throughout the interview, I avoid all mention of John, all mention of the Beatles, all mention of that fateful night outside the Dakota. I ask her about her way of thinking, her way of looking at the world. I ask her how it feels to be an outsider in art, music, the media, society in general. How it feels not being like the others. Yoko looks me in the eye and smiles. She laughs a lot. After a while, she becomes so engaged that she even touches my arm. By the time she has to go, we've spent so much time together her schedule is wrecked. 'You're nice to talk to,' she says after getting to her feet, turning to give me a wave as she's led away.

That same night, the UK photographer and I meet again on a boat trip on what used to be a small whaling boat. Ringo Starr is with us too, and Sean Lennon, John and Yoko's son.

Yoko posts on Facebook that the little boat is just about big enough to contain her family and closest friends. It takes us out to Viðey Island, to the Imagine Peace Tower, Yoko's installation consisting of a shaft of light projected into the sky each year on John Lennon's birthday. The event is an annual tourist attraction, and ferries have been put into service for the public. We land on the opposite side of the island from where the ferries come in. Three Toyota minivans are on hand to take those of us who can't manage the walk to the Peace Tower. Yoko sits in the first. I'm in the second, along with Liv Tyler and Roberta Flack. Together, we're taken around the island, stopping for a bite to eat at the small museum there on our way to the installation.

Yoko throws the switch and her art lights up the sky to the sound of Lennon's "Imagine".

The following evening I'm Yoko's guest at her concert at Reykjavik's Harpa concert hall. The only seats available are for her friends. So that's where I sit.

A week later, and I'm in New York. As it happens, Yoko has a gallery show opening. I decide to go along with a friend of mine. It'll be fun to see her, if she turns up. The gallery is packed, a sea of expensive clothes and heavy jewellery. It's a world I've only rarely seen. Yoko's archivist comes over to me, remembering me as Bjørn from Iceland. I ask if Yoko is coming. I'm told she is, though it's still a secret. After a while, a ripple of excitement goes through the room. Yoko arrives and gives a performance. Everyone is as stunned as they're star-struck. Yoko Ono in performance is a rare occurrence indeed, even in these circles.

She exits through a door at the rear, which promptly closes behind her. The archivist, who's been standing next to me, steps away for a moment and exchanges a few words with one of Yoko's assistants. After a second, they wave me towards the rear of the room. A couple comes out. They look wealthy enough to be purchasers. Allowing them first to come through, a hobbling Norwegian yokel with clubfoot and spina bifida then opens the door and goes inside. Yoko looks up and her face illuminates in a big smile: 'I remember you!'

Mum and I are in our room at the hotel in Krakow. It's evening. We're drinking champagne and eating crisps, the way we always do in the evenings when we're on holiday together. As we talk, Mum looks at me and repeats something she's so often said before:

'I'm thankful for your handicaps. Without them, you might have stayed behind in Brumunddal and been a postman or something.'

Translated by Martin Aitken