

## Reflections

We are seated in the bar at a hotel in Jurmala, a resort on the Bay of Riga, high above the Baltic Sea. Long white beaches, birch forest and dilapidated wood buildings. It is the first time we travel together. It is her sixtieth birthday, early July.

In the ceiling a disco ball slowly turns. Music plays softly, voices in the room are low.

We sit quietly, a forced silence that arises when the expectation is speech: when everything is arranged to that end. I think of the couples one sometimes sees at cafés or restaurants, who have spent an entire life together. Perhaps they don't go out often but once they are out they have nothing to say to each other. The last guests leave and we are the only ones left. We finish our drinks and sleep lightly in the heat.

I recall how I as a child stealthily observed my mother as she stood before the mirror and how I wondered what she saw. I recall how she tried to move with as little resistance as possible, modified herself according to others' expectations.

As the years have gone by, this has gotten better. But she says she doesn't know what freedom is, not the kind of freedom that does not also mean shame. To be able to accept oneself as one is.

When I as a teenager found myself in the same state, emotionally indifferent, with a desire to become someone else or dissolve completely, she was reminded of her own youth, years of starvation and destruction. Through her paintings she found a language for what she could not express in words. Vulnerable women, just standing there with empty gazes, completely out of synch with themselves.

Trapped in their bodies. Art is perhaps the space where she is unconscious, where she does not see herself through someone else's gaze. Each construction or mannerism becomes apparent, a failure. She says that each new painting is a struggle and, on a regular basis, pure hell. While the greatest sense of vitality emerges when everything feels right.

The motif of vulnerable women recurred, expressionistic images with a great deal of darkness, self-portraits. I recall one painting especially: a woman holding a cat in a tight grip. The woman with her shattered gaze, her entire expression distorted, a ruined face. I wrote to the paintings, gave the women names and contexts; to disarm them and by approaching them at the same time distance myself from them. Only much later did I understand why they had moved me so. It is easier to repress, to close one's eyes to the darkness. Especially when it is about yourself. You turn away, look down, go inward. You do not want to play roles. You long to be set free. But you cannot flee. Even in the silence, you speak.

I wake from her disappearing into the hallway. The hotel is on the beach. I see her from the window: she is carrying her camera. Some boys play by the water even though it is the middle of the night. Large spotlights illuminate parts of the beach. The ocean is black and there is a strong wind. At breakfast her face looks different, has a strange cast. Something yielding and at the same time resolved.

Her features constantly shifting, as though she contains all ages at once. A girl of perhaps ten sits alone at the table next to ours. The mother is frenetic, speaking into a phone while she fetches bread and coffee. The girl sits and plays with a napkin, looks out the window. For a few seconds it is as though her entire expression changes. Her face becomes transparent and all that she is, thinks and feels is

concentrated into a single point. Like when a slight shift in the everyday abruptly summons an elevated sense of the unreal. Karin immediately reaches for the camera, but it is too late. Suddenly the girl is aware that we are looking at her, she looks down. Soon thereafter the mother appears. They sit near each other but there is no connection between them. Just then, when we are observing them, aware of the silence also between the two of us, I decide to make a film. About how close you can get to the person you think you know so well. About the unconscious transfers and how sometimes a sentence, a glance, can determine how things turn out. About the symbiotic relationship between mother – daughter, art – life and the abyss in between. How little we know about each other. The lies we surround ourselves with, how we live with assumptions, about ourselves, about others, about the world around us. Even our own memories.

We are standing in a long hallway on the top floor of the hotel. We remain standing there, as if we are waiting for something. A woman in a white coat passes without looking at us. Her movements in slow motion. The air is stifling. The windows cannot be opened. Still, the thin curtains flutter, perhaps from a breeze somewhere. Down below we see the beach and people like little dots. She puts away the camera. We stand completely still and gaze out. The building moves like a ship, we drift away, a bird flies straight into the glass. The light falls. The transparent red curtains like fire. The sun melts and disappears into the ocean.

I wonder if she is afraid of beauty, that it will become too beautiful. She says it is about how you relate to it; if there are any cracks, anything off kilter. And at the same time, the more beautiful something is the more painful is the reminder of its ephemerality. She always carries that feeling, even during those moments when she is very happy, how temporary and fragile everything is. Perhaps it is because of all the sorrows she has borne. The taxi driver plays Leonard Cohen's "Anthem" when we drive out to the airport the next day: There's a crack in everything, that's how the light comes in .

Karin often took her names from Cohen's songs when she was young. She sought out the destructive, lived in a state without boundaries between reality and fiction, always on her way somewhere else. She called herself Melinda after Dylan's "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues": Sweet Melinda. The peasants call her the goddess of gloom. She speaks good English and she invites you up to her room.

She lived in a myth of herself, the woman in the songs. Her beauty became an armor and a weapon. To lose oneself. To become someone else. She met Marc in the late 60s in Holland. Not until they were to be married did she reveal that her real name was Karin, not Melinda. She was accepted to the Art Academy in Den Bosch and started to paint continuously. They soon moved out to the country in Värmland, lived a simple life in the woods, far away from thoughts of success or a career.

Jurmala is contained in my memory, saved there. The feeling of emptiness, that nothing has actually been said. How we walk around in our separate worlds. Still it is as though we have grown closer. Some things must be handled with care, they cannot be forced; they perhaps cannot even be expressed in words. In the same way that, in art, you are thrown into a state of mind and technique becomes irrelevant, -isms and categorization lack meaning. Suddenly you recognize something you have never before encountered. The feeling that you have been to a place but forgotten it, or meet a stranger you recognize.

Karin notices little details, sensitive in the face of the slightest shift; it is in both of us. There are no filters, no protection. The fragility that sometimes makes it unbearable to live, but also the opposite. She recalls the nurse in the delivery room who examined her before she slowly moved her hand away. She does not remember her features only the exceptionally long fingers, right before she said, "There is no heart beat." The umbilical cord had wound itself like a snake around the child's neck. Several years later she loses her mind completely when she finds a dead foal in the pasture, strangled by the electrical fence. The mare stood beside it, head hanging and with milk dripping from her udders. Our memories that color our view of the world. How a detail, a scent can hurl us back into a state of mind. And how a wound can be torn up again and again. An accumulation of images in memory that affect the encounter with the next image. It can be something in the tone, something that strikes you; the little details that suddenly emerge and gain meaning when we rest our gaze. Thirty-four years later she paints a suite of hospital images. Where does everything come from? Where does the process begin? She often gets the question how long it takes to make a painting. What does one answer? Sometimes an entire life.

She no longer yearns for somewhere else, not in the same way as before, when she always carried a diffuse longing for elsewhere. She works methodically, does not let herself be distracted by the world outside, by social media or telephones. She turns everything off during long periods of time, makes herself unreachable; moves between the house, the studio, the stables, the forest and the lake. To live in a limited space without turning away from the world. The same path every morning, the same forest, the same trees, the same faces. A dependence on routines, structure, to not collapse. It is the same landscape but still not the same landscape. The eternal shifts in mood. The chemical reactions in the body. The weather. Some days the air is completely still and the sky weighs on the earth. Other days the air is free and it is easy to breathe. Perhaps it does not matter where we are. Every day coffee at eleven o'clock. Then the neighbors come by: the auto mechanic, the pastor, the photographer and the farmer, sometimes all at once, sometimes one at a time. They make small talk about the weather, about the electrical fence around the horse pasture that needs to be repaired. She swims every morning, even if it is below zero and a thin layer of ice on the lake. The clarity she feels when water surrounds her body. The weightlessness. She never swims far out, stays near shore, never in deep water. The Fryken lakes are unpredictable. Out where the lily pads crop up there is a steep drop. A hundred and fifty meters. Ships have foundered there.

We sit down by the dock, my sisters and I. The lakes are long and relieve one another. A clear view for a few miles southward towards the Nilsby bridge. Red span of concrete arcs and cars passing like lines across the sound. The surface of the water a mirror reflection across the entire lake. Something expectant, like waiting for a catastrophe. Mother stands by the railing a few meters away and observes us. I feel her gaze in the corner of my eye. An ant crawls up my leg. A bird rises over the water. A gust of air in the stillness. I sink into myself and am at the same time completely present. I look at my sisters. That inherited melancholia beneath our skin, a part of our bloodstream: the tone of a voice, a chime. What we all three recognize in our mother. She looks for something. The moment or

second when something cracks open, when self-consciousness vanishes. A state of dissolution, when it is no longer interesting whose face it is, when everything melds. And beyond the frame the image continues...

The earth, the water. A matter of course, a requirement for life. Never anything forced, nothing constructed. The body is drawn to the earth and the water like a magnetic force. Each morning the same walk. And then the animals. They stand there with their open eyes. They cannot disguise themselves. They do not long to be something else. The dogs that always guard over her in the studio, follow the slightest movement. Or the deer out in the fields. Mother takes her usual walk with Timo, my nephew, he is four years old. They walk slowly. He finds a large leaf on the ground that he carries with him. They talk about everything. The kind of conversation that lacks direction or expectations, that does not need to lead to conclusions or explanations. A child is so close to that state of absolute presence. How they can be completely swallowed up by something. The concentration. The directness. The theoretical or analytical is subservient.

She describes a dream. In it, it was an unusually dark morning, as if a blanket had covered the sky and dulled the light. The air was thick and difficult to breathe. The dogs lagged behind. Suddenly they had disappeared and she was completely alone. She came to the large fields where the forest begins. The fog had settled heavily and she could only see a few meters ahead. It grew darker the closer she came to the forest, and when she was by the ditch where the fields end and the woods begin, she discovered that everything was gone. The mountains were bare and where the trees had stood were deep black holes. A faint sound could be heard from beneath the earth, as if from a wounded animal, but still a human sound. She approached and looked down into one of the holes. Arms reached up towards her, faces a combination of human and animal, rooted in the ground. She tried to escape, but her legs were heavy and she could barely lift them. She felt how she slowly grew into the ground, sinking. The earth split open.

The door to the studio is always locked. Only the dogs are allowed to be in there with her. Music turned up high: Nathalie Merchant, Lucinda Williams, Mary Gauthier, female voices with a lot of darkness. Marc rings the bell when dinner is served, then out to the horses. The days have their pace. Each day a new mood.

The same image from the bedroom window when she wakes: open fields and land. The light slowly approaching.

Text by Sara Broos. Translation Jennifer Hayashida