



H U N G E R

H E A R T

K A R E N

F A S T R U P

TRANSLATED BY MARINA ALLEMANO

FIRST ENGLISH EDITION

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Translator's Preface

Toward the end of *Hunger Heart*, Karen, the protagonist and narrator, refers to Norwegian writer Vigdis Hjorth, whose book she is in the process of translating into Danish: "It's a novel, but the Norwegian critics have been busy adding two and two together and are of the opinion that it's autofiction or reality literature . . . It's clear to them that the text is her own life." But certain revelations in the book have made some critics feel uncertain about the veracity of the disclosures and query the status of the implied autobiographical contract between reader and writer.

The autobiographical genre has a long history, and conventionally the autobiographical contract has relied on the text's truthfulness while allowing the writer to add a modicum of poetic licence. Not so with autofiction, the genre *Hunger Heart* belongs to. It is unapologetically both fiction and factual discourse, both a novel and a frank account of events in the writer's life. When Karen Fastrup was asked by a radio host whether it is true that she, the writer, really ran naked down Ballerup Boulevard, as described in *Hunger Heart's* first chapter, the answer was "No." The rhythm of the wording fits into the sentence, the writer replied, and hence the description became part of the story. The French writer Serge Doubrovsky—the first to use the term *autofiction*, in reference to his book *Fils* (1977)—might

have said that Fastrup “entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language.” In other words, the artist consciously created art from her own history and in some instances flouted the autobiographical contract.

However, breaching the contract is not the same as having committed a deceitful act. As a literary work, *Hunger Heart* in its totality is unmistakably an honest account of a woman who has experienced a mental breakdown and survived to tell the tale. The autofictional text is hybrid: both intimately personal and for the most part verifiably objective, playful, and serious, floating in emotional landscapes while being firmly grounded in geography. Like the books by Canadian writers Nelly Arcan (*Putain, Folle*) and Sheila Heti (*Motherhood*), *Hunger Heart* is art with an activist subtext.

Thank you to Karen Fastrup for her invaluable guidance through the novel’s linguistic universe that often evades normalized diction and syntax. By way of unusual somatic metaphors—related to skin, flesh, blood, membranes, orifices, and mysterious bodily fluids—the narrator attempts to understand the nature of her anxiety and identity crisis. “Also the act of writing feels physical,” the author explains in an interview. She can feel her pulse when she writes and transfers the sensation to a verbal rhythm that frequently manifests itself in repetitions as well as dense imagery. Also thank you to Jay and Hazel Millar for their thoughtful editorial work, and to Stuart Ross for his excellent copy editing.

A note on place names: Most chapters are headed by a precise location and time. Apart from Copenhagen and Jutland, the place names have not been translated but in some cases expanded to indicate the approximate geography and jurisdiction, e.g., Ballerup

in the Greater Copenhagen Area and Frederiksberg neighbourhood in Copenhagen, where two of the psychiatric centres referenced in the text are located. Names of streets, squares, parks, neighbourhoods, cafés, and bars are sprinkled throughout the text and have likewise been glossed to orient readers who are unfamiliar with the capital region. Place names that end in “-gade,” “-vej,” and “-stræde” are typically street names, whereas “plads” and “torv” refer to public squares or plazas.

Marina Allemano

February 2022

For Malte and Selma
For Anne, Niels and Ida
For my mother and father

PART

ONE

**Emergency Room, Admission
Ballerup Psychiatric Centre
Greater Copenhagen Area
18 October 2015**

I can't breathe, I say to the psychiatrist.

I'm a squealing bullet at eye level who doesn't look to see if there are legs under the chairs. They have seated me in front of a table. No windows, so far I get it. Almost possible to touch both walls at the same time should you get the idea of opening your arms wide, which I wouldn't dream of doing. Arms and legs within reach. Once in a while, hands flap around in my field of vision. Presumably they are mine. I ought to get hold of them, but I don't have time now. I'm talking.

I'm not allowed to be myself, I say to the psychiatrist, in that relationship.

Shouldn't he say something?

I look out through my wide-open eyes, and the words come tumbling out of my mouth.

I want a pair of eyes to look into, do you understand?

He nods, slowly.

I'm supposed to be calm and discreet, I say in a loud voice, but I'm not calm and discreet.

The psychiatrist's brown eyes look at me from behind glasses, try to see if you can seduce him!

Finally, finally there's someone who understands me. He hasn't said a word, but I can see it on his face. We are two of a kind, the psychiatrist and I. When I'm in the row house, I can't breathe, the squealing bullet tells him, because in that place no one can understand who the bullet is.

The psychiatrist's signals are a bit vague. But of course he can't just tell me point-blank that I'm in the wrong place in that relationship and in that row house. That's not how it works. But I know he's on my side, he would have felt the same way. It's crazy what I have subjected myself to.

I have forgotten to pay attention to who I am, I say.

I'm a rope ladder dangling down the sewer. Rungs connected by threads. It's probably this ladder I began to pull up to street level and flung down on the dining table in front of Jan and his family at dinner three hours ago, I'm this one and that, and here is the whole pack of us, there you go, most likely that's what I said when I slammed the clattering rungs down on the table and ended up here. How can I possibly breathe?

The nursing assistant who Jan phoned from home, the one who said we shouldn't come here, is present during the interview. I don't like her. Not only because she didn't think we were welcome here. But because she can't see who I am. I'm a very civilized person even if I'm here. One shouldn't misjudge me. And that's what I think she's doing.

They admit me, which you can almost always get them to do. We fight over the beds, steal from each other. But we share certain experiences. I know there's a magic word: suicide. With that you can enter the hallowed halls.

The nursing assistant takes me up to the ward. I'm now hers.

It's society's cost-cutting trick to arrange the hallways in such a way that no one with an already shattered soul wishes to come back, it's well thought out. Psychiatric in-patient units are shitholes. What does that make me?

I look for Jan while walking behind her.

We enter a room. Two metal beds. Naked walls. A narrow window high up. There have been cutbacks since the last time I visited someone in a place like this, no covers on the duvets. Or is it to prevent us from hanging ourselves with sheets and duvet covers?

My jeans and my sweater are draped over the back of a chair. Has she undressed me?

Where is my boyfriend? I ask.

The nursing assistant doesn't answer.

Where is Jan? I yell.

She stops in her tracks, turns toward me.

He's gone home, she says.

My boyfriend has left, *hey*, he doesn't want me.

He's gone back the same way he came. I've been delivered with a bar code wrapped around my wrist. It goes without saying that I should be where he is. The squealing bullet hits me hard in the chest. Something oozes out of the hole, I try to stuff a towel in the gap.

I jump past the nursing assistant, out the door, down the stairs, out through the swinging doors, to the parking lot. Taxis are moving slowly under the street lights. They—or the police—are the ones who deliver the lunatics to the place. The drivers' flat colourless faces are within eyeshot. I'm naked. The west end is so ugly, something we agreed on a long time ago, I don't even have to check to be sure. I run out on Ballerup Boulevard, I want

to stop his taxi. Access roads have street lamps placed unusually high above the road. White light. Sounds from tires hitting the wet asphalt. And my bare feet.

I run back. I have to collect my clothes so I can get away in a taxi too. The stairs, two at a time. The room. My clothes still hanging on the back of the chair.

The nursing assistant enters.

I'm going home to Jan, I say.

Just a minute ago you complained about him, and now you suddenly want to go back to him, she says. Can't you see for yourself, it doesn't add up, does it?

I don't remember complaining about Jan. It leaks out of my chest, and I struggle to get dressed and stuff my things into the bag. The nursing assistant is brusque.

You're staying here, she says.

It seeps out of me.

You stay here, she repeats.

Her face is unyielding.

I turn toward her, standing straight and strong.

You people have a problem with communication here, I tell her in a determined, authoritative voice.

Here I am, having to be taken care of by a nursing assistant who thinks she's superior to me because I have come through the door downstairs and run around naked on Ballerup Boulevard. I say to her:

Only people who are truly fucked up come here. They should be treated with empathy.

You're staying here! she says.

Is this a case of involuntary hospitalization? I ask. I know my rights.

She shakes her head.

No, right, I say, and pick up my things.

I escape. It's incredible how fast I can run.

But they run after me. Not the nursing assistant. The psychiatrist and a nurse come after me in the parking lot. They keep a fair distance from me, following me around as if I were dangerous. They say things to me in a calm voice. I know very well why they are doing it, they want to catch me. If they don't keep that distance, they risk me getting scared and running off. That's what you do with animals, you sweet-talk them while keeping a distance. Until you've tricked them into feeling safe and then you jump on them. Possibly with a net.

We think you should come back inside, the psychiatrist says.

I point out to him that they have a communication problem on the ward. Not him, he has a very empathetic way of communicating with me, I say. But her, the nursing assistant. The psychiatrist stands still in the parking lot.

Maybe you're right, he says. But I think you should come with me up to the ward.

I stop. Still keeping my distance from them. I stand still. They stand still. They don't come closer. It's possible the psychiatrist can be trusted. It'll be up to me to approach him if the distance between us is to be reduced. He's not going to jump on me. It's undoubtedly a calculated and conscious move on his part. But it works. I think he's good at communicating with me. That's what I tell him.

I'm glad you think so, he says.

I take a few steps toward him. He stays put, his hands in his pockets. Then he turns around and walks into the building. I follow him.

We walk into the room. The nurse dresses me in a hospital gown and gives me benzodiazepines. Then she leaves. The

psychiatrist sits down on a chair by my bed, all the while looking at me.

May I hold your hand? I say.

The words spill out before I have time to snap my teeth together.

He hesitates.

Just for a minute, I say. I have to moderate my request. I'm balancing on the edge of civilized behaviour. The presupposition is that physical contact between patient and psychiatrist is unacceptable. Physical contact between patient and nursing assistant may on occasion be warranted.

It's okay, he says, and offers me his hand.

We hold hands.

Unfortunately I have to let go of his hand quickly without achieving the desired effect of human touch. For the squealing bullet is wide awake and hyperconscious of the thousands of thoughts going through the psychiatrist's head: How transgressive can I expect her to be? How do I stop her? Will she eat me? Give her an inch and she'll gobble up a mile. I'm ferocious. I'm not part of the human family, I'm forced to be abreast of things so as not to miss out on whatever I might be able to pick up here and there. I'm a bitch, I snatch up bits wherever I can, and then I'm gone again.