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Review

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Stalking Kin

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Wiederholung Vigdis Hjorth übers. v. Gabriele Haefs
S. Fischer Feb 2025 €22 160 S.

Will and Testament Vigdis Hjorth übers. v. Charlotte Barslund
Verso Sep 2019 £10,99 336 S.

Is Mother Dead Vigdis Hjorth übers. v. Charlotte Barslund
Verso Oct 2022 £14,99 352 S.

> *I think the sirens in The Odyssey sang The Odyssey,*
> *for there is nothing more seductive, more terrible,*
> *than the story of our own life, the one we do not*
> *want to hear and will do anything to listen to.*
> —Mary Ruefle, Deconstruction

Families are incredibly complex organisms, a fact as simple as the sky being blue, almost as factual as its blueness, and yet surprisingly underappreciated. Like all for-profit organizations, they can be sites of profound harm. Most children adapt to their families in order to survive. In some, you need to be invisible; in others, you need to perform: be loud, be funny, make money, or excel academically. In others, you need to fail and be made into a black sheep – carry the family's collective faults to keep the system intact.

It is true that, in recent years, there has been a growing discourse—both in fiction and nonfiction—that critiques the family not just as a site of personal dysfunction, but as an ideological structure that triggers and reproduces trauma. Novels such as Gwendoline Riley's *My Phantoms* and memoirs like Harriet Brown's *Shadow Daughter* portray the necessity and emotional complexity of estrangement from narcissistic or abusive parents. On the nonfiction front, Joshua Coleman's *Rules of Estrangement: Why Adult Children Cut Ties* and *How to Heal the Conflict* examine the psychological and social forces behind family breakups and show the statistics behind it—challenging the assumption that familial bonds must be preserved at all costs. And yet, even with this growing body of work that has culminated in Sophie Lewis's recent radical call to abolish the family altogether, to criticize or reject one's family is still culturally framed as a betrayal.
Soon after reading Vigdis Hjorth's novels *Will and Testament* and *Is Mother Dead*, I came across a video lecture she gave in my hometown, Tbilisi, at a literature festival. Georgia is an intensely family-oriented country; criticizing, let alone disowning one's family is unthinkable. No matter how they've wronged you, in society's eyes, you're the one at fault. You're simply outnumbered, outpowered. Fairness and truth don't enter the equation. You'll be called dramatic, labeled a liar, accused of a vivid imagination. They'll insist the matter is too "complicated" and that blame can't be assigned easily. "*Parents aren't perfect*," they'll say with a condescending tone, even though you never expected perfection. As the protagonist of *Will and Testament* says, "I often felt like being isolated in a combat situation." Very few people will be willing to stick with you as soldiers in similar "wars."

In Georgia, counter-narratives do not abound. Nana Ekvtimishvili and Simon Groß's *My Happy Family* from 2017 offers a rare and incisive critique of the traditional Georgian family—not through melodrama, but through the quiet and radical act of a woman walking away from her family to continue her live alone. Manana, a schoolteacher in her 50s, doesn't leave her multi-generational household because of some overt catastrophe, abuse, or scandal, but because she can no longer bear the erasure of selfhood. The film reveals how easily surveillance, obligation, and the suppression of individuality can be disguised as love, all in the name of collective harmony. Manana's departure becomes a seismic rupture not because it is dramatic, but because it breaks the unspoken rule that a woman's identity must dissolve into the duties of keeping the family intact.

I'd always seen Western Europe—especially Scandinavia—as at least a bit different, but reading Hjorth's books made me realize that, unfortunately, it is not. Even Norway, out of all places, seems similar to Georgia in this sense. We live in a time where everything dark concerning parents, siblings, and families, in general, remains an impossible topic. The family has not yet seen its equivalent of the #MeToo movement. While the cultural norms and external forms may vary in different countries, the emotional core—the dosage of

expectations, the silencing of individual experience, the misbalance of power, and the pressure to maintain appearances—seems to be universal. This universality is both comforting and horrifying. If you've cut contact with your family for any reason, the entire world can start to feel like a place of powerlessness and exclusion. For a species like ours, with hunter-gatherer nervous systems, exclusion from our "tribe" is computed as a form of death.

"That Person Who Has a More Complex Story"

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Vigdis Hjorth says, "Most families have a kind of official family story ... 'This is how we do Christmas,' and so on. If one member does not share this official, nice story, there is a big tension. I think I have given a voice to that person who has a more complex story, who is not prepared to be part of it. The family won't listen to her, and there is a great deal of unpleasantness."

Indeed, "that person" was long in need of a voice, and desperately so. Consider this: 70-80% of child sexual abuse cases involve a perpetrator who is either a family member or someone close to the family. Yet, research has shown that out of those who dare confront their families in adulthood, an overwhelming majority lose their family ties. Be it sexual, physical, verbal, or emotional abuse —the bottom line is that most families deny the harm they've caused or the abuse they've enabled, pouring all their energy into discrediting the one who dared to expose the system.

In *Will and Testament*, the other family members refuse to believe Bergljot when she accuses her father of sexually abusing her at age five. Her siblings and mother choose to alienate Bergljot, and not the father, spreading damaging narratives about her—akin to a well-funded propaganda campaign—to preserve the family's image.

Verso usually publishes books with politically radical undertones, so, I was asking myself, what is political about family estrangement and drama? Everything, I realized, because power—the act of overpowering—is political. As the Jungian analyst Robert A. Johnson writes, "People think that hate is the opposite of love. Actually, power is the opposite of love. Love is identity with the other, while power is the desire to control the other for our own purposes." In its mobilization of vast resources to silence a member who threatened its image or reputation, the "family system" serves as a small-scale model of how narratives are manipulated, loyalty weaponized and propaganda spread to protect vested interests and ancestral authority.

As Hjorth noted in her Tbilisi lecture, "Wars in families are like wars between countries. You don't want to see the people you have hurt." Or at least you don't want to see and hear them hurting. You want them to "get over it"; be silent about it, grow out of it, forget. If they refuse, you need to dehumanize them.

Sometimes, you need to make them seem dangerous and crazy. You need to turn the tables and make yourself look like a victim—someone who is being slandered and framed by their own ungrateful child. How else would you justify your actions, enabling or ruthlessness?

By denying Bergljot's experience, her family avoids confronting their own complicity, choosing the appearance of unity over accountability. This decision to preserve an image or sustain a shared delusion cuts to the core of Bergljot's trauma, exposing with brutal clarity an utter lack of love—particularly in her mother's choice to protect her husband and her own image over the daughter. It is a horrifying form of abandonment: to be first betrayed and then unchosen by the very people who are meant to protect us.

Then again, as Hjorth mentions at the Tbilisi talk: "It's important to understand how tempting it is to believe the father rather than Bergljot. Here, you have a grown woman claiming her father did so-and-so to her when she was a child. But the father denies it, looks into the family members' eyes, and asks, 'Do you think I could do such a thing?' It's simply so tempting to believe the father because, without evidence, there inevitably has to be a choice."

Siblings don't want to be seen as part of a family where such a thing could happen, where such a thing was even possible, because what would people think of them? Perhaps they need to keep perceiving their parents in a good light to stay in denial about their own hurts and histories. Or they need to keep believing in the goodness of their father because otherwise, everything they knew about the world, about their loved ones, about their own identities, would suddenly come into question. It's easier to "sacrifice" Bergljot than to confront a truth that shatters your world.

"Everything You Wish to Forget Comes Back to You"

In her novel *Repetition*, upcoming in English, but now hot off the German press as *Wiederholung*, Vigdis Hjorth delves one more time into the impact of revisiting past traumas and the transformative experience of confronting them. The narrative intertwines the experiences of a grown woman navigating dark woods with her dog while reflecting on her sixteen-year-old self. The younger version grapples with typical adolescent experiences—awkward sexual encounters, first kisses, and the exhilaration of teenage parties. These moments of aliveness, intoxication and growth are set against a backdrop of an overbearing mother trying to control her unbridled hunger for life and a distant father, hinting at a significant and dangerous family secret introduced early in the novel. "Everything you wish to forget comes back to you, seeks you out, calls you home—so insistently that you feel as though you must live through it all over again. It often summons the same overwhelming and uncontainable emotions as the first time, stirring them within you. You are afraid you might die from their intensity, so you fight against their return, resist them—but you

cannot prevent them, nor can you shield yourself from the pain that follows. And so you are forced to endure it once more."

In her New Yorker piece about *Will and Testament,* Lauren Collins wrote that "Hjorth seems to have formulated from her experiments with living models a model for living, in which exposure—of the self and of others—serves a larger purpose." Here, the one who revolts against the family becomes a rebel with a higher purpose; one who speaks truth to power, "regardless of the costs", and in the name of "progress for the many". "The narrator" in Hjorth's 2014 novel *A House in Norway,* Collins concludes, "reserves her greatest admiration for those who are willing to be both the speaker and the subject, the heroine and the wretch—'those who turned the scrutinizing spotlight on themselves' and let it burn."

Sometimes, we trade authenticity and agency for a sense of belonging. We suppress truths, stay in denial, tolerate more than we can bear, and sacrifice self-awareness and self-respect to keep the peace. So, when we see someone daring to "let it burn", when we see a person doing something that, deep down, we may wish we could have courage for ourselves—we judge, and eventually disbelieve them.

In *Is Mother Dead*, the artist Johanna returns to her home country, Norway, after many years abroad and fixates on her estranged elderly mother, who refuses to speak with her. Hjorth, with a deliberately monotonous rhythm, draws us into Johanna's headspace. At first, Johanna seems reasonable, then she gradually descends into paranoia. The reading experience becomes psychedelic, almost hallucinatory, pulling us into her pain, her desperate attempt to understand the past: "I'm not allowed to see what I have seen (...), and yet I don't leave because suffering is a link that brings a magical pleasure that happiness can never deliver." And then: "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." But what happens when that hand is the same that is closing the door in your face, beating you, or brutally pulling you away?

Hjorth does not shy away from exposing the skeletons in her protagonists' closets. This is where the true power of her stories lies: she crafts well-rounded, self-reflective, psychological characters and narratives, as if the reader can almost see Johanna's own Jungian shadow—her repressed and darker self—trailing her through Oslo's melancholic, autumn-drenched streets on late November nights as she obsessively stalks her estranged, elderly mother.

"I Thought I Was Drawing Mum, But I Was Drawing Myself"

In Hjorth's phantasmagoric, Kafkaesque, and deeply psychoanalytic literary world, there are no villains or victims—only ghosts, the potent power of imposed attachment, and a tragedy born from the absence of love that can define and haunt us forever. "Nothing that happens during childhood has a

name," writes Annie Ernaux in *A Man's Place,* and Hjorth in *Is Mother Dead*: "If we understood when we were young how crucial childhood is, no one would ever dare to have children."

Johanna's fixation on her mother permeates and leaks into her art, revealing a raw, almost primal drive to unearth, dig up, and expose the truths buried in their painful relationship. Her new series of paintings, intended for a retrospective, veers unsettlingly toward self-portraiture, though initially disguised as images of her mother. Johanna paints her mother in charcoal, conjuring the darkness she "swallowed" as a child and has carried with her ever since. As her psychological boundaries blur, her creative process reflects a hauntingly cyclical need to give shape to her mother's ghostly figure, which paradoxically keeps morphing back into her own likeness, making her feel a claustrophobic terror: "I thought I was drawing Mum, but I was drawing myself. I thought I was studying Mum, but I was studying myself. So had I ultimately not got close to Mum or Mum's world with my pencils, but only my own?"

In Hjorth's novel *Repetition*, the narrator feels broken, disjointed, and recursive. Her mind continually cycles back to her relationship with her mother, a bond marked by conflict, tension, misunderstanding, and even emotional violence. This recursive return is not just thematic but structural; the narrator's thoughts echo, loop, and unravel, as if trying to reach and repair something long lost.

Freud's term *repetition compulsion* is often used in a negative light, associated with the pathological return to past wounds. Someone experiencing this compulsion repeats painful situations, emotionally or physically. But what if, as in Hjorth's *Repetition*, we repeat in order to be free? What if the urge to return is not a symptom of illness, but a necessary movement toward healing? If we repeat our past—our wounds, our traumas—consciously and symbolically, we might not be trapped but released.

Behind all this lies what Winnicott called the "fear of breakdown": the idea that we are haunted not by trauma itself, but by the fact that it was never fully experienced—never survived, never completed. In *Repetition*, the narrator's looping narrative becomes an almost ritualistic attempt to complete something —to live through the fracture, even if it means enduring pain, and to withstand what she couldn't bear the first time.

All three novels, *Is Mother Dead*, *Repetition,* and *Will and Testament* address the impossibility of letting the ghosts of our past go—especially when these ghosts are our own siblings and parents. Yet they also illuminate the imperative necessity of releasing these ghosts. There is no release, however, if we are not prepared to see our own faces and shapes in the terrifying silhouettes of these ghosts, to notice our own shadow trailing us, to look into our paintings and find, in horror, like Johanna, that we have been painting ourselves, stalking ourselves —all along.