

STILLHET
by Finn Janning

S

I once had a professor in philosophy who repeatedly said, “I am always, another.” The comma was crucial. It marked a passing, he said. By connecting the before and the after, it stresses a passage. I am always more than I was — and still less than what I will become. Continuously, I am in the midst of becoming someone else — of being formed and reformed.

My professor’s favorite statement is, of course, a paraphrase of Arthur Rimbaud’s famous line, “*Je est un autre*,” meaning “I is someone else.” The French poet deliberately disobeyed the rules of grammar, mixing first person singular with third person singular. Later, he wrote, “Right now, I’m beshitting myself as much as possible. Why? I want to be a poet, and I’m working to turn myself into a *seer* ... It has to do with making your way towards the unknown by a derangement of *all the sense* ... It’s wrong to say *I think*: one should say *I am thought*.”

What Rimbaud pointed out is that one can only transform if one lets go of his or her illusions. For example, he or she must let go of the illusion of being in control, of being a fixed and unchangeable “me.” Rimbaud said that it is okay to be disturbed or confused; in fact, he encouraged the acceptance of disorder or chaos as a state of being that forces one’s creativity and inventions. He knew that becoming a poet was courageous and generous, as it meant seeing new possible relations. It was, in his words, to be *thought*.

I think of Rimbaud now. He was ahead. Am I catching up? Recently, I had an intense encounter with silence. In this silence, I was *thought*. This experience reformed me. It transformed me. I became someone else.

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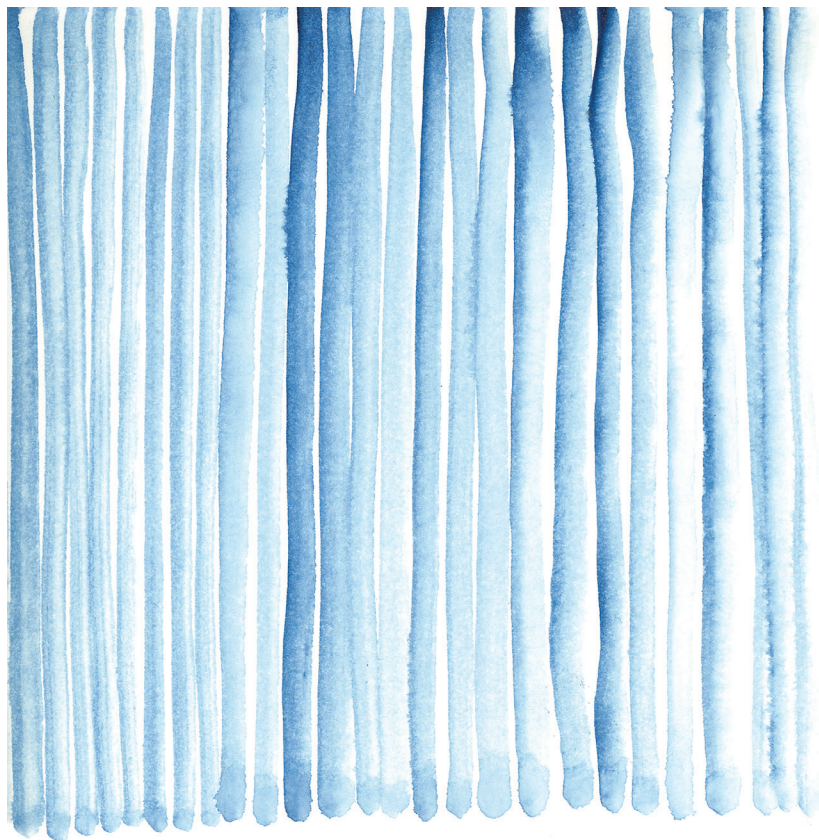
In the late spring of 2014, I left my home in Barcelona to walk in Norway for twenty days with Jeppe Hein. We were pilgrims without a religion. Before we left, I didn't know what to expect. Neither of us was seeking anything specific, yet we were both receptive. Ready in some way.

The days were routine. We would get up in the morning and walk. After five, six, or even ten hours of walking, we would reach a point where it made sense to stop. Then we would rest, eat, clean, and prepare ourselves for moving on. After a few days, we felt like doing nothing but walk. *We were walking*. Gradually we blended with our surroundings, which were quiet and calm and green and seemed to have no end. We walked into nature. Perhaps we also walked into (or out of) ourselves.

What is inside? What is outside? It's difficult to tell when the context is silent. Am I thinking, or am I thought? In this way, silence reminds me of writing. Roberto Bolaño describes writing as being akin to taking dictation. Michel Houellebecq says that to be an artist is to be submissive.

Silence actualized itself for us somewhere in Norway. *Stillhet*, they call it there. It emerged as more than just a break away from a busy, noisy, perhaps even stressful ordinary day. The number of days we walked made it possible for us to get acquainted with silence. We came to know it neither as a sacred or spiritual position, nor as an opposition to today's competitive performance society. Rather, we got to know silence as an ongoing preposition. It quite literally gave me an experience of changing. Silence made it possible to experience that "I am always, another." That is, through silence, "I is someone else."

Enough suspense. Let's move on to (and into) silence.



T

Silence is; it exists. I imagine that it is the only thing that actually *is*. That is to say, silence has an unquestionable being. One can question noise. How much noise is there? What is the source? It is also possible to judge noise. For instance, we get to determine whether it is annoying or beautiful. Noise is like the girl sitting next to you on the bus: her smell, her movements, perhaps even her constant talking or texting. Is she annoying or is she beautiful? The temperature in the bus and the feel of the seats are kinds of noise as well. Depending on the context, these things can be more or less disturbing.

Silence is different. It is just there. Either there is silence or there is not. Some describe their meeting with silence as being noisy: “the silence was deafening.” But silence is not noisy. The truth is, silence means that we are not being held up by anything; therefore, it can awaken a peculiar feeling in us. Why? Normally, noise helps us to place ourselves in the public space. Noise guides us when it directs our attention or cultivates a certain form of behaviors.

Silence is different. In silence, we are left with our own ability to perceive. That is, we are able to really sense or experience what it is that connects us with the world. We need to make the decision about where to go next. All of us are always in the midst of changing, but in silence, I—at least, any I that is—actually experience becoming someone else.

Without getting too technical, there is a difference between being a “me” or an “I” and being a self. The latter incorporates the former, whereas the former—sometimes—is without any relations. It has no connections. Most of us know the saying, “I am what I am,” an indisputable statement that is often used as an excuse. A self, on the other hand, becomes through its relations. A self is an inner experience. For want of a better word, I will describe this experience as *intuition*.

One's intuition changes, while a self grows and expands through new experiences. A self, therefore, is not an entity; it doesn't have a pre-defined core that one can evaluate one's performances against. It changes. It becomes.

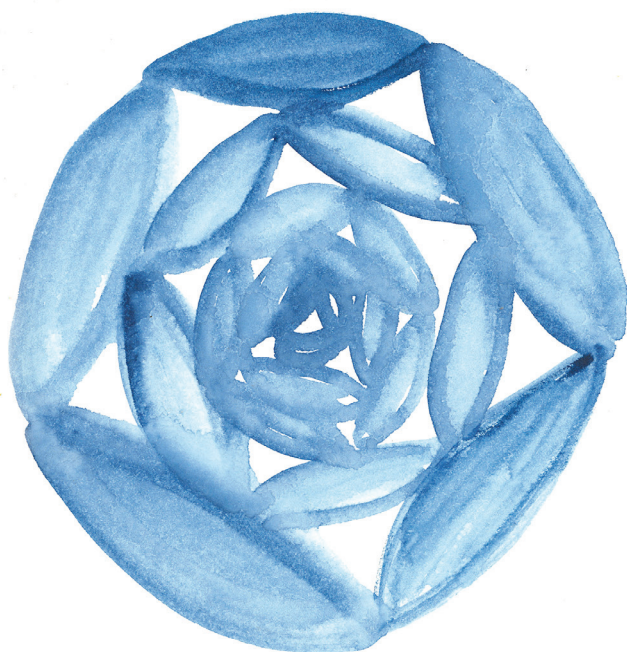
In other words, silence informs us. In some ways, it is not unlike reading a newspaper. Afterwards, we acknowledge its unquestionable necessity. Necessity is the main issue here. It is quite obvious, if it happens. It commands us without giving us any room to escape — unless, of course, we are not willing to use our feelings and experiences as helpful tools. The message appears to emerge from nowhere and from everywhere at once.

It's a bit tricky. I admit that submitting yourself to silence — that is to say, to trust your own intuition — may sound like something out of a science fiction novel. The genre, however, is of no importance. All that matters is the recognition that appears. It emerges as being both inside and outside of your body. For a brief moment, you feel like a stranger in your own body. Tossed, as if in love. And then the realization dawns that your body fits you even better than it did before.

What did it? What changed you? The answer is silence.

The necessity is unquestionable.

How did it happen?



I

A life is an ongoing process of maturing. The process doesn't move in predetermined or sequential steps. There will never come a point when we can say that we have finished maturing. A life unfolds gradually. Sometimes it unfolds in completely new directions. Other times it unfolds in no direction at all. In silence this becomes clearer. Therefore, it requires courage to follow silence. An encounter with silence marks a clear, obvious, and certain *before*. And when a mark is made, we learn exactly what the silence opens, expresses, or facilitates. It makes certain options possible, and after these options become available, nothing remains the same.

It goes without saying that getting there takes effort. We have to prepare ourselves in order to match such an encounter. In order to become worthy of what might happen in the silence. Again, I think of writing. Imagine a writer who writes every day in order to remain in good shape. In order to stay prepared. In this same way, through training, we remain capable of doing what is required when an encounter with silence comes to pass.

And then, one day, it happens. An experience with silence manifests itself as a self-evident recognition.

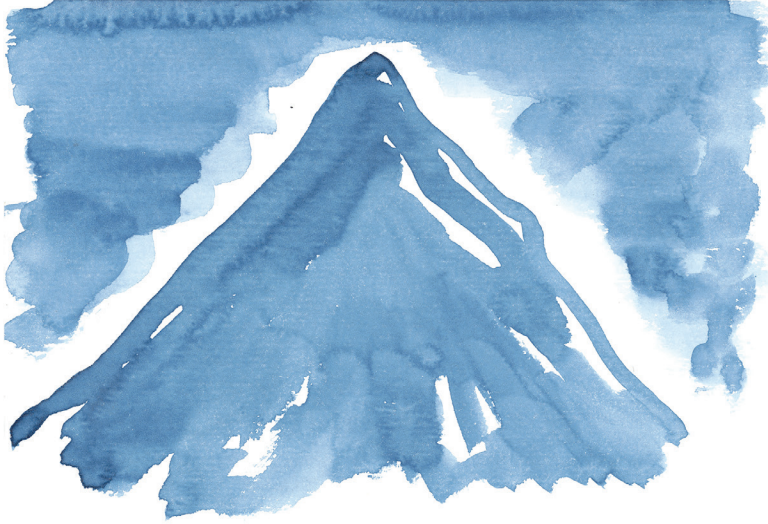
There is, for obvious reasons, something scary about silence. It is a staggering force that can't be neglected. It can't be debated. Silence creates a situation where each of us is able to meet ourselves as another — provided that we are ready, of course. It's a confrontation. I really *is* someone else. The same man who flew to Norway for a walking trip didn't return to Barcelona. Hallelujah. Of course, it's always like that. Yes, time is change, to be sure. But some changes cut deeper than others. After all, I am always the same; that is, I am always another.

When we encounter silence, we are forced to view ourselves in a different light. It goes without saying that some of us refuse to do so. Some of us hold on to previous ideals, norms, or habitual ways of thinking; that is to say, some of us hold on to an old identity. However, if we want to become free, there really is no other choice than to submit ourselves to what emerges.

Freedom is mandatory, I think.

Silence makes it possible to *become* free. To resist following the herd blindly. Silence is also capable of creating a new path — of leaving behind a new trail. No one is born free. It is something that one becomes. Silence as such is not a virtue. Instead, it can help establish a relationship between ourselves and the world. It can help construct a generous ethic. Thus, “I is someone else” basically means that “I” has transformed into a growing self. A self without any fixed identity. A self that persists with the courage and the ability to activate its power to live. A self that does what it can.

Do what you can, not what you wish.



L

What is silence? How do we experience it? While these are appealing questions, they are nevertheless absurd. Silence, unlike closely related synonyms such as tranquility and quietness, doesn't *take* place—it *is* a place. Indeed, silence is a temporary meeting place. Therefore, a more useful question is: "Where is silence?"

Where?

The place where silence happens is important. It may be reached through meditation or by going deep into nature. It may be reached in countless ways.

Still, silence cannot be reached without cost. A derangement of all senses is required, as Rimbaud said. He stressed that encountering silence—actually meeting silence—requires hard work. I don't mean the kind of work that entails walking around, searching for silence under each stone, behind each door, or on every mountaintop. Silence is the opposite of such distractions. Silence is the opposite of having an objective. It's much more like an experiment. It emerges and then it disappears, leaving a tattoo. We know it when we feel it. It emerges as an inner peace, because we are at peace with what we are not. A certain degree of humility is mandatory. Therefore, silence emerges only when we are ready for it. It comes only when we can say yes to it.

Rimbaud called this practice "beshitting oneself." It's difficult to live without getting a bit of dirt on our hands. As any concerned parent knows, there are some experiences that can't be passed on to our kids; they need to make their own mistakes and have their own experiences. They need to participate in life to become more alive. More connected. In the same way we can never experience the power of Dostoyevsky without reading his books; we can't know what it means to make love without sweating on the sheets; we won't know

that climbing down a tall tree is far more difficult than climbing up it unless we first ascend. We can teach our kids a lot of stuff, but for them to become free, they need to experience certain things first-hand. Maybe not all things, but some.

It's enough to feel and experience how different situations change our breathing patterns. Even such a simple experience can make any human being humble. For instance, if I hyperventilate first thing in the morning after eight hours of sleep, I might just be an anxious person by nature; if I hyperventilate because my son just hurt himself severely, then I am definitely feeling anxiety, but for a whole different reason.

Silence, in other words, is not contemplation or reflection. Both are related to the question, "What is?" I can't step outside myself to evaluate.

What's more, silence is not the quietness that helps us to concentrate or perform a given task. Such a practice is related to the question, "How does?" I don't know where I am heading before something moves me.

Silence just happens. It can happen at any time of the day, but only in a place where we dare to leave behind what we treasure the most: the idea of me being an I. The idea of being in control.

I'll give a few examples from my walking trip in Norway. At one point, I experienced the sensation of being outside of myself while I was crossing a bridge in Trondheim. Specifically, I experienced that "I" was no longer being "me." I literally turned into something else. I transformed. My old "I" — or, perhaps, my previous idea of being someone else — jumped off the bridge. Yes, my old "I" simply dropped off the bridge and fell twenty meters to the surface of the water. It happened. There was nothing I could do. For a second, of course,

I thought of jumping after this outdated idea of me. I had the urge to help myself remain me. But I couldn't. In my mind, I heard the splash as though I had jumped. In my mind, I was scared. I saw how Jeppe jumped after me. I saw . . . another life end. I saw parts of my previous life dissolve.

When looking from a distance—that is, from my desk in Barcelona—I can see that I, for a while at least, had been waiting for the appearance of an inescapable or inevitable experience of freedom. Crossing the bridge, I didn't feel free (or I was not free), in the sense that my actions were limited. For instance, I couldn't refuse what happened. Yet, I still felt the freedom related to becoming imperceptible. Letting go, rolling along.

For a day or two, I was dizzy. Scared, yes; but also liberated.

I can't speak for Jeppe, but I think that he too experienced something when he encountered silence. After more than a week on the road he said, apropos of nothing, "Of course, my wife and I should have another child." *Of course* is the key phrase here. When it happens, it is so obvious. This was the case with Jeppe. He looked like a person at peace with himself. Afterwards he called his wife, momentarily penetrating the silence and saturating it with pure feelings. Life folded around future life.

Let go. Then, perhaps, the power of silence will strike.



L

Where is silence?

The answer to that question is difficult. We can't really get on a bus or a train headed for silence. I mentioned that silence might be reached by going deep into nature. To some extent that is true. Yet, in order for silence to emerge, we actually need to be capable of tuning in the world. Our readiness for silence comes with being aware. With being open. It's not difficult to imagine a person in the middle of the peaceful Pacific thinking about something turbulent like her stock portfolio. Similarly, we can also imagine a person in the middle of Times Square who is able to transcend the various forms of disturbance.

Are you prepared for silence?

Meditation may be another answer, at least for some. Meditation is understood as a training of our mind and body as a way to create a meeting place for what is already there: silence. Meditation is a practice of balancing between our reason and our feelings; too much reason hinders the flourishing of our senses. It is an ongoing process of establishing balance or harmony. A life in balance is like a pilgrim wandering: sometimes his or her body leans forward, and sometimes it leans backwards or to the side. It all depends on the terrain. On the world.

Walking—truly walking, and not just taking steps—is like meditation. The body joins with the surface of the earth. A better image might be the bicyclist who becomes one with the bike. It becomes impossible to define where the human being stops and where the bicycle begins. They become one machine.

At one point in Norway, I fell on my ass. I had thought I was walking, but it turns out I was just taking a series of steps. I fell because my body was too stiff—too out of place to really mix with

what surrounded me. Being out of time and out of place are two things we simply can't be when we encounter silence.

If desired, we can meditate in whatever way we find useful. It's quite simple. Once we encounter silence, we actually notice that the ground or foundation we're standing on moves. Nothing is more certain than the fact that everything changes. There is, therefore, no formula for how to encounter silence. It's an ongoing experiment.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write: "Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of de-territorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there ..." To me it's clear: they are hiking.

We must experiment with the opportunities that silence offers. It is a matter of being compassionate. The future exists not because of the survival of the fittest, but because of the survival of compassion. Plainly speaking, there are forms of life that can only survive if we care for them. And all forms of life matter. That is why it is so difficult to stand face to face with silence.

Silence connects all things, and all things matter. But will we care for them?

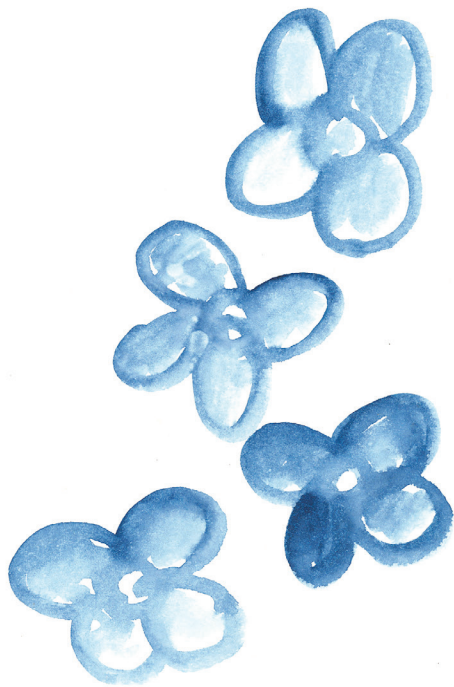
What do you care about? Do you have the courage to roll along?

To find balance is to be balancing over and over again. There is nothing static about it. We must experience our movements. We might wish to stand still, clinging onto our hard-earned identities and to our prestige, power, and glory. But in the end, we will fall. Life doesn't care about our identities. Life doesn't feel compassionate about our title(s). Instead, life passes through us. It enhances us, if only we dare to put down our armor and our vanity. For a moment we borrow life, and if we take proper care, we can pass it on.

Being alive is better than being anything else. The only kind of immortality there is, is what is sustainable. Is what is livable. Are you brave enough to pass on the livable? Even if only for the sake of expanding the future space for possible experiences?

Are you generous?

YOU MAKE ME....



WONDER....

H

No one owns silence

It's accessible for all

Irrespective of gender, age, race, faith

Irrespective of what

Irrespective of how

Silence is a place where everyone is equal

The only thing that one can count on, if one encounters silence, is
change

Change

Silence changes everything

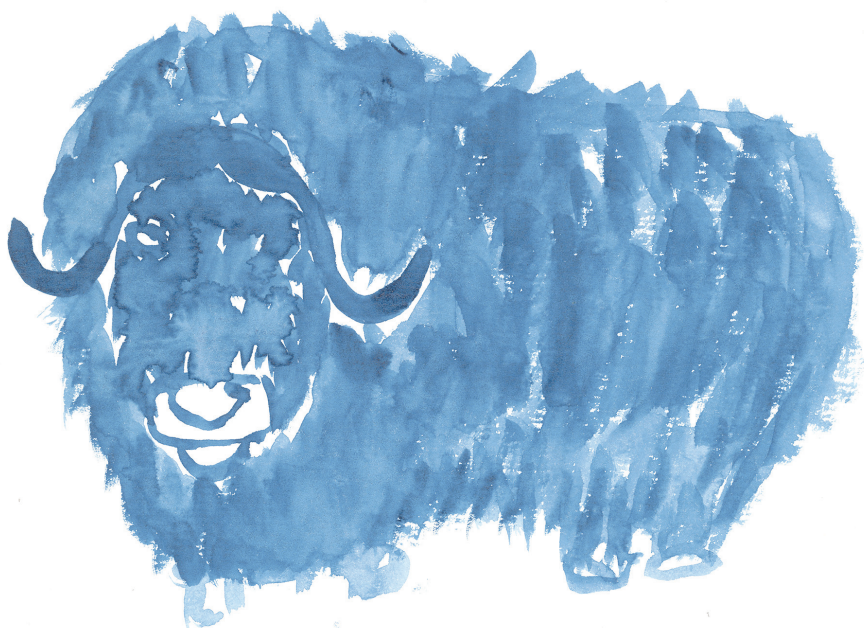
We all change, yes, but in silence we change differently

Silence is a wordless change, perhaps best said in a foreign language:

Stillhet

Stilhed

Silencio



E

During our walk in Norway, I discovered how silence is rather difficult to handle at first. However, after some time and some bodily adjustment towards our surroundings, I discovered how enriching silence is.

After two or three days, when Jeppe needed to break the silence, he didn't ask me about Spinoza or Deleuze. Instead, he began talking about the smells. He was preparing himself. Fine-tuning his senses. Becoming more attentive. More aware.

On the third or fourth day, after a long spell of silence, I said, "Look. Look!" Fewer than fifteen meters in front of us stood a muskox. We threw our bodies down and hid behind a bush. We took off our backpacks. We were part of the eco-system. I grabbed my knife, and Jeppe grabbed his camera. It all happened as pure instinct. Fast. Our actions might be seen as protecting life as well as documenting it. A combination that might actually be perfect.

When the muskox began to move towards us—it wanted to pass by—we ran away. In fact, we climbed up a tree. Our hearts were pumping, our skin shivering. The muskox strolled by. Slowly. It stopped and looked up at us. It was pure calm. "Relax," it seemed to say. "Relax, because the real shivering experience lies ahead."

And the muskox was right. Moving away from an idea of being an "I" towards becoming a mixed body is far more scary, but no less beautiful. The muskox was a test. What is livable can't, of course, be protected with a knife, just as it can't be documented with a camera. It needs to be experienced—live.

Now let me reframe this story. We met a muskox in Norway when we were hiking. It might be easy to say that we lost track. Yet, the opposite is true. We both needed to look that muskox straight in the eyes. It carried its old body with a grace that made me realize that life was running through my veins. It was that basic.

I remember how Jeppe had been talking about smells earlier that day, walking with his nose pointed to the sky and sniffing the air as if he could already smell the muskox. He became a dog sniffing the trees and the dirt. He was aware.

That day, something made my pulse dance also. Even before we saw the muskox, I knew we were getting closer — closer to something. An old love of mine, Depeche Mode, sings somewhere, “There is something beating here inside my body and it’s called a heart.” Yes, I agree; my vital heart-shaped muscle is beating because life affects me. Turns me into someone else. It’s *life* that runs through my veins.

As I stared at the animal, I thought, “This muskox could have been me.” In that moment, I thought that being a muskox would not be a bad life. Now, sitting in my Barcelona office composing this text, I still find the life of the muskox to be just as attractive as my own. It even smelled good.



T

I think silence emerges when we have the courage to walk the plank. I don't think that silence necessarily appears at the end of the plank, however. It's not a goal. Rather, it appears if we are simply willing to walk the plank. That is, it's ours if we're willing to keep on walking. To move into the unknown. I fell at one point. No more plank. But I got up, and then I encountered the muskox. It's about losing and confronting your ignorance. Questioning what we believe to be true. Liberating our selves from ideals, norms, and habits that don't suit our nature. Becoming free from everything other than the things that really touch us. From everything other than what makes our selves grow.

We must be aware of the things that touch us without telling us anything, because those are the things that are actually worth listening to. This is why silence is interesting. In the midst of silence, no one can guide us. We are on our own. It's up to us. We must drop our illusions and use our intuition.

The only thing worth possessing, I think, is also the same thing that is worth passing on to the next generation.

JOY.

I'm richer since I returned from Norway. It's not like I received a large inheritance there or anything. I didn't walk away with a tidy sum that I could have spent on a cozy family car. No, what I received is something I can only call joy. It was joy towards nothing else other than being alive. *The joy of being alive*. That's it. And that is worth passing on.

Although I knew that before I went to Norway, I now know joy more intensively as a bodily experience. As something inscribed in my flesh. It's like being a kid again. Kids are happy most of the time — they're full of joy for no other reason than being alive. Yet, my joy has nothing to do with being a kid. After all, we don't encounter

silence crawling around in a smelly diaper. Rather, it's like becoming mature. And becoming mature is to acknowledge how everything is related. Connected.

The poet becomes a seer; the writer takes dictation or becomes submissive. Meeting silence can, potentially, make it obvious that the real goal of living is to get rid of all our predefined goals. To be inventive. To walk. To create our own trails.

First there is silence. "And then the storm of shit begins," as Roberto Bolaño writes in conclusion of his novel, *By Night in Chile*. He is right. To become alive is to create a path through a storm of shit. Silence helps without saying a word. Silence washes away all that which is not worth repeating. A part of me was washed away in the chilly water below a bridge in Trondheim. I don't miss him.

I thought I was thinking. Now I know, *I am thought*.

Illustration: Jeppe Hein, 2014
www.jeppehein.net