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Tove Ditlevsen

There Lives a Young Girl in Me Who Will Not Die

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Selected Poems

TOVE DITLEVSEN

Translated from the Danish by Sophia Hersi Smith and Jennifer Russell
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Foreword: Who I Ought to Be and Who I Am

While I write this, my husband is cycling through the rain, taking our one-year-old son who last night yet again wouldn't sleep, to nursery school, and I am thinking of Tove Ditlevsen's poems. I, too, want to write lists of my quirks, vices, unattractive traits, that which is me but not me. Those I love, but don't love. What I ought to do and be, but neither do nor am.

Reading these poems, which were written between 1939 and 1976, I realized that Tove Ditlevsen's poetry is always about the discrepancy between *who I ought to be* and *who I am* (which leads to the inevitable *awkward* moment in so many of Ditlevsen's poems).

Take, for instance, 'The Eternal Three', where love is not the exalted union of two souls; rather, one is always in love with the wrong person. Or in 'Self-Portrait 1', where Ditlevsen lists what she can and cannot do: 'I cannot: cook/ pull off a hat/ entertain company . . . I can: be alone/ do the dishes/ read books'. Or in 'Warning', where the heart 'can only dream, not yearn/ for what exists in light of day'. In these poems, there is so often a longing for something that is not, something that was, something that could be.

Or in the poem that lends its name to this collection:

'You had a girl's dream of a husband and baby, / and you got what you wanted but were still alone'. Fulfilling the dream of family doesn't bring an end to loneliness, it doesn't lead to what you thought it would. Instead, you're split in two – you are now the girl from before, the girl who still lives and cannot die – and the woman who is 'left roaming a world of stone'.

While I write this, the nursery school teacher gathers my son up into her arms; soon they'll hand out apple wedges to the children. While I write this, our wages trickle into our accounts, silent as snow; and while I write this, my husband cycles to his office; and while I write this, the hours race by, and I need to buy groceries, and I need to clean the fridge.

Tove Ditlevsen was born in 1917 into a working-class family in Vesterbro, Copenhagen. She attended school until the age of sixteen, after which she did various odd jobs and finally, in 1940 at the age of twenty-two, married the fifty-two-year-old Viggo F. Møller, editor of the poetry journal *Vild Hvede* ('Wild Wheat'), who had published her first poem in 1937. 'It probably wasn't necessary to marry him to move up in the world, but no one had ever told me that a girl could make something of herself on her own,' Tove Ditlevsen later said. She had debuted in 1939 with the lauded poetry collection *A Girl's Mind*, and from there her body of work grew steadily. She produced about a book a year or every other year – a staggering output – publishing thirty books and countless articles and agony columns. Meanwhile she had children and got divorced, then remarried, first to Ebbe

Munk in 1942, then to the doctor Carl T. Ryberg in 1945. In the following years she became addicted to prescription drugs. In 1949 she was committed for the first time to a psychiatric ward (she would return several times throughout her life), and in 1951 she fell head over heels in love with Victor Andreasen, an editor of the tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet*, to whom she was married for twenty-two years before their bitter divorce, which figures in several poems in this book. In 1955 the collection *A Woman's Mind* was published, cementing Ditlevsen's acclaim and earning her De Gyldne Laurbær ('The Golden Laurels'), a once-in-a-lifetime prize awarded by booksellers. Her magnum opus, the memoir *Dependency*, was published in 1971 and describes her drug addiction and many husbands. The book's Danish title, *Gift*, is a homonym that means both *poison* and *married*; in this way, Ditlevsen pointed to the thin line between love and addiction, between marriage and abuse.

Victor Andreasen and Ditlevsen's relationship was turbulent and the subject of much gossip, not least in the press. Shortly after their divorce, Ditlevsen published an anonymous personal ad in her ex-husband's newspaper that read:

> Having escaped a long, unhappy marriage, I feel lonely in this world where everyone is coupled up. I am 52 years old, 172 centimetres tall, slender and blonde. I have an eight-room apartment in Copenhagen and a lovely summerhouse. I have no lack of money, only love. I've made a name for myself in literature, but what good is that when I am missing a loyal and loving companion of a suitable age, preferably a motorist. Interests: literature,

theatre, people and domestic bliss. Please supply a photograph and details of personal circumstances.

I have always thought that the ad was such a good example of how Ditlevsen, in demeaning herself, in fact gains the upper hand. It's a tactic she uses often in her poems. The literary critic and author Niels Barfoed has described it as follows (italics mine):

> There is something unguarded and accessible about Tove Ditlevsen's person, at times even a certain do-what-you-will-with-me attitude, which can be shocking if you don't understand *that this defencelessness is her own particular form of resilience*. She's tough as nails, this woman. Accessible? Certainly. *Behind her accessibility, you sense secret areas, concealed regions not a soul can access.* Not even her. And it is naturally these places we encounter in her poetry, which is to a great extent poetry about darkness and fear of the dark, about something that lives its own life inside you, inside reality.

I can't say whether Barfoed's quote captures Tove Ditlevsen's *person*, but it's a good description of one of her *literary* strategies: using defencelessness as resilience. Behind the defencelessness there is something you cannot reach or lay claim to – do what you will, but there are parts of me you will never conquer.

Everyone knew right away who had written the ad. Ditlevsen was incredibly famous. From the outset of her career, she appeared almost weekly in magazines and newspapers, on television and radio, in articles, photo features and her popular agony column in *Familie Journalen*.

Many of her contemporaries looked down on Ditlevsen for appearing in lifestyle features, giving interviews, often posing for photographs, in the kitchen, at her desk, with her children, almost always in the home.

Ditlevsen was one of Denmark's most photographed writers. Her fame helped keep her financially afloat, because even though Ditlevsen was very popular among readers, she was always short of money (what she writes in the personal ad isn't true, or at least she contradicts herself repeatedly elsewhere). Or perhaps she feared running out. Her upbringing in a working-class family where money was always scarce had a lasting impact.

Tove Ditlevsen was not only a working-class writer, but a worker's writer. She describes the conditions of workers in Vesterbro, the daily lives of women and children in working-class neighbourhoods, the poor, the marginalized, the oddballs, the sex workers on Istedgade. In her poems, there are also echoes of working women's schlagers (catchy pop songs with often sentimental lyrics), poetry and lullabies.

Housework, childminding, care work and so forth are important features of her authorship. Her writing has not previously been considered proletarian literature, but I would like to explore this further.

The revolutionary subject, the worker, has always been presumed to be a man at the factory. But when women bring children into the world, children who grow up to go to the factory, work is being done. All the work that goes into reproducing the labour force, not only growing them from your own flesh and blood, birthing and nourishing them, but also keeping them clean and capable, keeping the hearth warm, caring for the elderly,

all this is work, is production, reproductive work, and should be considered as such.

If it is the woman's job to bear children and keep house, to produce new workers for the state, feed them, keep them clean and healthy, the woman's relationship to her own body can be compared to that of the worker's to the factory. Hence, women's literature about their own bodies and housework is *workplace literature*. Tove Ditlevsen was a worker's writer.

It was with good reason that feminists of the 1970s (a group Ditlevsen never identified with; she remained in every way possible an outsider until the end) said that 'women never retire', and 'holidays and weekends are overtime'. In her 1959 essay collection *Flugten fra opvasken* ('Fleeing the Dishwashing'), Ditlevsen describes how a woman can only escape the household by having a cause greater than herself – doing charity work, becoming a nun or perhaps obeying the call to write.

In many of Ditlevsen's poems, we find this reproductive work described – the work of housekeeping and childrearing, of waiting on men and her aversion to it. While her early poems are written in formal verse, and in the original Danish are rhyming, her later work is narrow on the page and pithy in style. The ultimate shift occurs in *The Adults* (1969), which is characterized by the exhaustion and audacity that hallmark the rest of her authorship. Gone is the 'girl's dream of a husband and baby'; now is the time of divorce, of alcoholism, and no matter how experienced and accomplished Ditlevsen becomes – as a writer, a mother, a woman – she will never feel at ease with domesticity.

Her poems increasingly revolve around this feeling of unease. From her debut until *A Woman's Mind* in 1955,

her poems uphold the dream of a future happiness only possible in the bosom of family, but her later poems harbour no such illusions of any possible familial harmony and instead centre on seeking brief respite: in writing, in alcohol, in childhood dreams, in death.

Ditlevsen died by suicide in 1976, at the age of fifty-eight. Photographs of her funeral procession show a sea of working-class women trailing behind her coffin through the streets of Copenhagen.

Since her debut in 1939 aged twenty-one, Ditlevsen's poetry has been dogged by the question of whether or not it was old-fashioned. Tove Ditlevsen continued to write in rhyming verse after World War Two and well into the 1960s, and this was, understandably, provocative to many, not least her fellow poets who were waging the modernist battle to challenge readers' conception of what a poem should be.

This critique of Ditlevsen was common and is perhaps best encapsulated by the author Klaus Rifbjerg's comment in a 2005 TV programme about Ditlevsen:

> She wrote rhyming poems, which were well crafted and well formulated, but wore a kind of corset she had squeezed herself into . . . She followed a tradition that goes back not only to the previous century, but the one before that, a continuation of that sort of romantic poetry where 'pain' rhymes with 'rain' and so on . . . Quite old-fashioned!

Here, too, lurks a discrepancy between how people believed Tove Ditlevsen *ought to write*, and how she *actually wrote*.

Let's talk about Rifbjerg's corset. It's an apt image: comparing fixed verse with the restrictive and constrictive garments women have been stuffed into throughout history.* In this case, it's clear that Ditlevsen has *squeezed herself into the corset* of her own volition. She has chosen this fixed form, these old-fashioned rhymes, a form of poetic, misogynist control.

But perhaps Ditlevsen didn't have the same opportunities to be free as Rifbjerg when he indirectly champions free verse as the superior antithesis of the literary corset. And one might ask whether the experiences Ditlevsen writes of have anything at all to do with freedom. Are they not precisely about a lack of freedom? About lost girlish dreams, about pain inflicted in a distant childhood, about husbands who walk out and children who look up at you strangely, and you remember once again that you are their mother?

While I write this, the nursery school children are strutting hand in hand down the path at Vestre Cemetery where Tove Ditlevsen is buried, the workers are slipping out into the sunshine after lunch, it smells of coffee, and I wonder whether the time in my life when a man will love me intensely, with no regard for children and little dogs, is definitively over.

What I'm trying to say is that some of Tove Ditlevsen's poems work deliberately with worn-out language, with sentimental language. With the corset. With the cliché. It's

* I've recently been made aware that it's a myth that corsets are constrictive, but Rifbjerg thought they were!

the voice of Eve in the eponymous poem who says: 'That's why my mouth has wilted, it has kissed too many men, / it has sung too many songs, it will never sing again.'

For me, this has always been a model of how you could write as a woman. Not the only way, but an important way. To embrace the image of the doll and speak from that position, cast aside like Eve in the poem, with nothing but old, worn songs on your fading lips.

It isn't easy to explain, but I understood it intuitively the moment I met Tove Ditlevsen for the first time, at the age of twelve, on a daybed in my grandfather's study after everyone else had gone to sleep, after I found a green book on his bookshelf and began to read.

I envisioned how she, the poet, wanders through a forest of pop songs, picking shiny, bright-red plastic apples for her poems.

These are the poems that take a form that doesn't seek originality, doesn't want to *make it new.* What do the poems want? They want to revive what has been cast off by tradition, the poetic scraps on the garbage heap. Why do they want to do that? Because using an archaic register is a working-class poet's middle finger to the hoity-toity modernists and, at the same time, a way of resurrecting discarded language. With this discarded language, it's possible to express an experience that cannot be articulated in the prevailing forms.

The preoccupation with rediscovering Ditlevsen's work has been considered, by some modern critics, as a feminist pursuit: not literary, but solely political. This is an attempt to relegate Ditlevsen's work to the field of 'women's writing', not real literature. It's interesting to see how this is linked to the capitalist ideas of 'sales and

branding', as if the re-emerging interest in Ditlevsen is an unholy marriage between women's lib and some dirty capitalist spiel, where young girls, vain creatures that they are, are sold pocket mirrors in the forms of novels, poems, selfies. The devaluation of female-coded poetry is palpable.

Which leads me to this idea of the woman – particularly in Ditlevsen's lifetime – as an anachronism in society. Of society being organized in such a way that the woman must play a role she has stopped playing (housewife, beloved, beauty).

I'm reminded of a quote from Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* about women's love lives: 'Women's emotions are still fitted for a kind of society that no longer exists. My deep emotions, my real ones, are to do with my relationship with a man. One man. But I don't live that kind of life, and I know few women who do. So what I feel is irrelevant and silly . . . I am always coming to the conclusion that my real emotions are foolish. I am always having, as it were, to cancel myself out.'

To cancel oneself out, to wear a corset.

If we read Ditlevsen's poems through the lens of Lessing, you could say that Ditlevsen's so-called sentimentality is a poetic anachronism that functions as a subversive tool, an anachronism on a par with a woman's emotional life.

There live girls in us who will not die.

And while I write this, all my kitchen appliances hum and spin, soon I'll have to pick up my son, and soon the chicken will need to be put in the oven, and soon I'll need to find the strength among my emotions to