

MARIT
TÖRNQVIST

JOHANNES
VERMEER
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Eulogy by Abdelkader Benali

In jute sacks, in an attic in a Swedish city, lie five hundred life stories written on wood. These are stories about leaving one's homeland in search of safety elsewhere. But a chill wind blows through Europe, doors remain closed, and if a hand is extended, it is cold and clenched: it is working on your return.

The harsh reality also strikes a group of Afghans denied entry at the Swedish border. And on those five hundred boards, all their stories are written down by a woman who has taken their suffering to heart.

The stories are written on wood - a warm material that, like people, gains lustre with frequent touch. Wood bears time within it. Wood is patient.

The writer of these stories called this project *The Great Loss*. Back in 2022. The stories were laid out on the steps of the Swedish parliament for everyone to read. The boards, framed in black, drew even more attention, symbolising the countless suicides among young asylum seekers - a hidden tragedy in a tale that knows only hidden tragedies. During the three days the boards were displayed, many people stopped to take them in. Marit Törnqvist, the writer of the stories, stood by, watching and engaging with anyone who took a moment to read. Stories were read aloud. Bystanders nudged each other, some uncomfortably, others trembling with shame.

Some politicians burst into tears, confronted with the cruelty of their policies; others looked away, embodying that cruelty. The stories struck a chord with passers-by. Marit Törnqvist took the boards to other cities, where they continued their journey through space and time as stand-ins for the migrants. She offered the boards to museums, but none accepted. Marit Törnqvist interpreted this as the institutions' helplessness in facing such painful history. Too sensitive. Not now, maybe later.

Once it's over - the hell.

And now the wooden boards lie in an attic, where, in Marit Törnqvist's own words, "they lie like stranded driftwood."

On 1 August last year, Marit reflected on her mission on her Instagram account: "I wanted to bear witness to the terrible."

What drives someone who has poured her heart and soul into showing us what makes life precious, to bear witness to what makes life unbearable?

Writing stories on wooden boards and laying them out on steps is a poetic act. The imagination from which it springs is the same imagination that creates touching illustrations where the spectrum of human encounters is shared. Where the drawing stops, the board begins, and vice versa.

In *Turtle and Me*, a grandfather tells his grandson about his friendship with a turtle. The grandfather received the turtle as a child from his own grandfather, who brought the tiny creature back from a far-off land. The turtle brings joy and, over time, also frustration. Its slow but steady growth turns it into an unwanted presence. What was once cute becomes a reason for exclusion.

Friendship with the exotic creature increasingly restricts the boy's freedom of movement. We see an illustration of the boy with the turtle beside him in the schoolyard, a square drawn around them with chalk. They are isolated by classmates.

"You belong in a zoo," the children call out. Interestingly, it's not only the turtle but also the boy, by association with the animal, who "belongs" in the zoo. When he takes the turtle to the beach, the other bathers keep their distance. At the disco, dancers trip over the turtle. Embracing the other can irritate those around you. The turtle grazes down the hedges. The boy drifts away from the community, lying lonely and exhausted on the sofa, with the turtle as the table holding a glass. The turtle teaches the boy a valuable lesson about hospitality and acceptance. In embracing the other, you may be left very much alone.

Eventually, the young man decides to return the turtle to its homeland and entrust it to his father's brother. Upon returning, however, he feels lonely and lost, having lost his identity without the turtle. Then he receives a letter. His uncle has died; who will now care for the turtle? Who will care for this creature that seems to live forever? He travels back to find a young woman who has looked after the turtle. It's love at first sight with the turtle. They marry. They have children, and their children have a son, who sits on Grandpa's lap, listening to the story. One day, Grandma falls ill and wishes to return to her homeland. She dies there, surrounded by Grandpa and the turtle. Grandpa returns home once again to find a baby turtle that has stowed away with the larger one.

And that turtle is given to the grandson, and the story goes on.

Marit's world captures fleeting moments that make life intense: meeting, farewell, night, day, the sun, and the moon. Happiness. Love. Friendship. Time erodes and strengthens our humanity.

Comparisons beckon, and sometimes we must embrace them to feel the warmth of the story.

The refugee is the turtle. But the turtle is not the refugee. Our capacity for friendship allows us to take the other as they are, bringing us joy. To bystanders, it is a turtle that grows dauntingly large; to the boy, it is a friendship that deepens and widens over time. But in all cases, responsibility must be taken, for the turtle grows on, undeterred. And will outlive us.

The tale is beautiful because it gives today's children what they so desperately lack: a story to dream away with, to feel what is important. If there's one thing children need today, it's space to dream, and Marit's books provide that.

The turtle's strength lies in its portability; it survives the longest journeys. And that brings me back to the people Marit stands up for in her work and her activism. She doesn't mince words. She embraces the stranger and refuses to succumb to scepticism. She is their companion on the journey. We are all stowaways, even if we don't realise it.

When she attended kindergarten in the Netherlands at the age of five, she was bullied. She must have felt like an outsider. And when you feel like an outsider, you start inventing ways to survive. You create an alter ego, one that can handle the world. And from that alter ego, stories came into existence.

Is Marit's sensitivity to the other shaped by her move to the Netherlands at such a young age? Idyllic Uppsala was left behind for Bussum in the Gooi. Children kicked her bare legs until they bled. Her teacher had to hold her in her arms to calm her down. She hadn't yet developed the turtle's tough skin. Her experience taught her that looking different and speaking another language sharpens relations within the group. That exclusion is ingrained in people and that freedom from it is also ingrained in people. This is all an artist's training ground.

I came to the Netherlands at the age of four and experienced those years as an overwhelming series of encounters. The people I met smelled different, dressed differently, and spoke differently. I must have seen the wonder in their eyes, too. And I think that surprise and wonder inspired me.

The fact that this happened also made the pain of strangeness bearable.

I feel moved by Marit's stories. I'd like to stand beside her on those steep steps leading to the echelons of power, to name those we've denied entry.

In recent days, I returned to the story of the turtle. I couldn't get enough. At first, it was a cosy pet. Then it became an excuse for exclusion. Then it became time itself. And when I read it again on a Sunday, the turtle became, for me, imagination itself. Imagination helps us deal with the strange. The strange can also be startled by us. Encounters can be uncomfortable, violent, or even deadly.

The only way to discover the strange is to engage in conversation. That conversation can take the form of an adventure or a walk through the garden with a turtle by your side. When I read the book once more, I saw Marit in the turtle. Like the turtle, Marit is a traveller. Between image and word. Between Sweden and the Netherlands. Between hope and despair. Between continents. Between generations. Making a cyclical, boundless journey. Her imagination is boundless and needs no passport, visa, or entry test.

And even when the book is closed, or the wooden boards are put away, it doesn't mean the journey is over. That's when the journey begins. Again, and again. We are all turtles. With thick skins.

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