

## The Back of the Embroidery

1                   When I was writing my latest collection of poems, I would walk around the house listening with my eyes, inwards and outwards, for something I could use; something with the right shade of blue, or a texture I had not noticed before; a book cover or a title that might blend into the fragile construction that had begun to form. I took a book off the shelf and started leafing through it; the paper had yellowed; the texts often took the shape of short paragraphs consisting of mere enumerations. I closed it and read the title: The Pillow Book. It turned out to be a collection of texts written by Japanese poet Sei Shōnagon around the year 1000 and reminded me that there are shockingly simple ways to describe the world. Shōnagon makes unfamiliar compilations and effortlessly and attentively constructs an astonishing hierarchy of things that each have something in common: emotions, objects, customs, stories she had heard, legends or occurrences. The paragraphs have titles like “Deeply Irritating Things”, “Miserable Looking Things”, or “Things That Are Hard to Say”. Much of what is described is set in a distant time and in a culture foreign to me (Shōnagon also had a position at court). But there is something about the way she assembles these Things – garments, tools, or particular times of the day, for example – that builds a tactile and sensuous consciousness, a gaze I can lift off the paper, out of the imagined realm, and direct towards the world around me.

In the section “Repulsive Things” she writes: “The back of a piece of sewing. Hairless baby mice tumbled out of their nest. The seams of a leather robe before the lining’s been added. The inside of a cat’s ear. A rather dirty place in darkness”.

“The back of a piece of sewing” has a particular impact on me. The reverse side of stitching. Or the back of an embroidery. The threads pulled in unpremeditated paths across the fabric, attached and tied with knots, forming a whole that is not visible to us. But there it is, anyway, just as real as the familiar front. This is how I imagine the world is: there are always undersides, insides, just as actual, just as tangible, just as close as the familiar front – if only we allow ourselves to feel them, open our eyes to them, listen to them. A concretisation of something beyond the recognizable. How might it change us?

2           The ancient writing style of boustrophedon reminds us that the world has, at times, moved from the complex to the simplistic. Writing in boustrophedon means that the trace of writing takes the shape of a serpentine – or the trace of an ox plowing a field, as seen from a bird's eye view. The hand would move from left to right, then make a turn down to the next line and continue from right to left, with the letters mirrored, in an unbroken chain of movement. Directions become not verse and reverse, not back and forth, but rather two equal figurations constituting the act of writing. The logic is lucid and organic, based on the experience of moving with regularity of pace and purpose, as when plowing or sowing.

3           Musician, artist and philosopher Kathleen Coessens writes in her 2012 essay "Sensory Fluidity: Dialogues of Imagination in Art", about the ability to connect past, present and future through sensory and embodied memory patterns. There exists a kind of bodily sedimentation that can build a bridge between one individual's experiences and someone else's; these bridges can be imagined together to form a grid that connects us and can give us a common horizon of experience. Through Coessens' words we see that the body, in its embodied states and possibilities can resemble a landscape; I am thinking of sedimentary masses, the layers of rock formations deposited over astounding periods of time, and the horizons in the seams between seas, mountains, forests and skies.

The world's ambiguity and richness of detail overwhelm us, Coessens writes; the world surpasses our possibilities for understanding, and for what we can create – but at the same time, it expands our creative abilities, our imagination – which, again, are parts of the same world.

4           Practicing a certain piece of piano music, the score led my hands exclusively to the black keys. Both bass and treble moved up there, in the airy intervals between the higher, narrower keys. It gave me a feeling of bypassing something, transcending, making room for something else: what lay between or behind the thoughts I usually thought, by leaving out almost everything. Like holding a piece of eyelet lace before one's face; omitting all but holes of bright existence. I saw things divided into colors rather than qualities, the tones of the piano and the sound of the birds and the roar of a car engine outside the window became separated from the piano and birds and cars, the light separated from the objects it reflected upon. The sounds took form, unbound from the things, the light and the sounds wove a new image that passed through the familiar unhindered by surface, impenetrability, excessive will.

5           Posing a question can often be the first initiation towards movement, change, transfiguration. Because a question is, in itself, a movement – a gentle nudge interfering with something in place. When working, reformulating what I know, what I think I know, and what I don't know into a question, is a shift of weight from one foot to the other that soon transforms into a series of other positions – a shaping of change. A question gently shifts the experience of thought, which again shifts the experience of any position. A question mark creates a delicate crack in the surface of a claim. It offers friction like that of touch – the hand feeling a surface. And in touching, movement has already begun.

In 2004, the Danish poet Morten Søndergaard published the short prose collection *At holde havet tilbage med en kost* [*Holding the ocean back with a broom*]. The texts in the book revolve around life, language and memory, and “the unpredictability of fate at all times and in all places where people have traveled since the dawn of time.” I could have written about several of these texts, but the book’s title, in particular, stands out, I think. It is a striking reminder of the many human inventions through which we strive to create a sense of control, or a degree of predictability; centimeters and millimeters, clockworks, scales, all kinds of measuring tools – as well as tools for encircling, such as language, classification, categorization. How far, and in what way, do our measuring tools extend in the face of the world? Do we perhaps prefer the part of life that can be reached with the help of these tools? What about everything that we are unable to grasp through the tools we have at our disposal?

We need tools to listen to the world, but we also need, I think, to remind ourselves who invented these tools, and that what we are able to listen to is a result of the way we choose to listen. Most things, after all, do not exist for our sake. In what direction do we wish to sail, what instrument will we use to navigate with, what is the next thing that should be turned towards the world around us?

