Interjections

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Non-words for the remembered & unremembered violence of Bulgarian labor camps

We live with others for years — in spring, when the first crocuses bloom in the garden, and in summer, when the wheat grows and the sun burns hot, and also in autumn, when it gets dark early and the birds fly south, and also in winter, when sometimes it is cold outside and warm inside, and sometimes it is cold inside and warm outside.

We live with others in all seasons of the year, for twenty years, for thirty years — with those we consider close to us, our beloved ones or significant others. They are above all our others, the ones dear to our heart with whom we share our everyday life, with all its joys and little pains, with every discreet « ah » and every discreet « oh ». Sometimes we think that our life consists of a long series of such interjections, marking the moments of joy, sadness, annoyance or despair: Ah, what beautiful weather! Eh, what a lovely day we had! Oh, such a splitting headache! Oh, dear, what a thing! Ah, the crocuses! Good Lord, oh, death!



Grammar terms these *ah*'s, *oh*'s and *eh*'s « interjections »: they are the most spontaneous, unpredictable and flexible parts of speech. People utter them without much thought when they are happy, when they are hurt, when they are afraid, when they have something to say, when they have nothing to say. Free and disobedient, interjections are the soul of utterance. An old Latin grammarian stated that interjections — these « non-words » — are independent utterances, that have no fixed place in the sentence, do not obey any syntax rules, and are intended to signify some affect or state of mind by means of an unformed word: *ah* and *oh* and *eh*. So people don't *utter* them, but rather *suggest* them, insert them between their words as a place of pure unformed affect within the strong order of words — like a little question within the answer, or, as in the verse by the American poet Mary Oliver — « Instead oh hear his wild, caustic, tender warbling ceaselessly unanswered… ». By means of interjections, people try to add something else to the main thing they are saying, something that cannot be said, something for which there is no place in language, something the words fail to name — an unknown joy, a hidden desire, a long-held pain. Interjections burst into language to evoke something beyond it — something that can only be shown in the very formlessness of the spoken interjection. Ah, these little non-words! They are the unformed stones in the human garden, thrown in all directions — without direction — between the crocus beds of language.



We have a nice house, the house has a nice garden, in the garden we plant nice flowers, we have breakfast and coffee together, we watch the sky at sunset, the children wrestle around us and the dog wags its tail happily. And we grow and change with others, bodies along with other bodies, growing like young wheat, ripening like yellow pears, we share our experiences and memories: all these whispers « I love you », or « I'm scared » or « Don't leave me ». There are so many of them. We go to sleep together, naturally, we wake up together; we spend time with each other, we fill our time and build a world — a world of joys and little pains — a garden with a lush green lawn and beds of purple crocuses, a space at the boundary of inside and outside, a space of intimacy and mutual understanding, of lunches and dinners, of cooking a meal, making the bed, enjoying a cigarette, touching a body — a space that spans all seasons, absorbing the colors of all times: blue like a varicose leg vein, yellow like a fried egg on the plate, green like mould in the bathroom, brown like a body in bed in autumn, black like the night.

This is how we live — with the words of others, and also with the interjections of others that link their words to us, we live as we make our way between each of their *ah*'s and each of their *oh*'s, in spring and also in autumn: ah, the crocuses! oh, the cold! We also live with the silences of others: in the evening, around the electric stove, in front of the TV, all together, young and old, in the morning while we are waiting for someone to make coffee: everyone in the house is already up, but no one is awake. No one is talking. The children have to get up for school, uff, the dog has to be walked, brrr. Oh, sleep! Ah, coffee! A series of interjections linking the silences and the words of others. A minimal utterance, a half-word, a non-word in which sometimes, rather rarely, we feel that something else is buried, a small shimmering key that has fallen to the bottom of language — something intangible, which still weighs, presses and lays wide open between us. A secret — an accidentally dropped, unformed word.

Like this we live with the silences of others, and we try to find a possible language, a secret word that binds us to others more than any human language; a secret garden where we are all connected, young and old, in an unusual way — we have said so many things together, and yet the most important thing — ah, the most important thing! oh, the most important

thing! — we have never said to each other. Who is going to tell you that there had been a « most important thing », who is going to understand it! And what is the « most important thing »? We think we know — but in fact, we know nothing. Unfortunately, everyone is an idiot in some way or another; they think they know everything, but they know nothing. That seems to be the makeup of life: questions, crocuses and idiots.

We didn't say it during the spring, nor did we say it during the summer: in the spring we were so busy, ah, because we were thinking about the summer, in the summer we were so busy, still circling, because we were thinking about the autumn, and in the autumn and in the winter we didn't think at all — because suddenly the cold arrived and nothing could be said, nothing could be thought. Ah, the cold — it tightens the soul and paralyses the tongue. The only desire left is to be inside, to be warm, but sometimes it is colder inside than outside. Why is that? Nobody knows, it's still a secret. Nothing more is said, or rather, only nothing is being said, it is left to the silence between us, the silence between us and the others, to speak for this nothing — we stand together in the evening, in front of the TV, draped in heavy clothes, freezing and staring at the screen with half-closed eyes, and no one speaks. Not even an *ah* is uttered, not even an *oh*. There is only nothing — the nothing between us and we are still circling in it.



We live with the secrets of others for years, young and old, without even suspecting it: who was born and when — this is one secret; who will die and when — this is another. There are many more secrets between us, many questions that have never been asked. We carry these questions within our bodies. We try to answer them — and oh, we cannot. Because they are not our secrets, because they are not our questions. We dream other people's dreams, we feel other people's pain — without understanding. The questions

are like foreign bodies stuck in our throat with every *ah* and *oh*. Sometimes they tickle us, sometimes they press us, sometimes they make us cry. We hide from others and cry — ah, and the weather outside is so nice!

We hide in secrets without suspecting it: we seem to be all together, but we are all alone. Your uncle — eh, something happened to him; some things occurred years and years ago, he was gone for a long time, then he came back… Your grandfather — Oh, it's a long story, I'll tell you sometime… Grandmother — don't ask, please, what was then was then, ah, let's not talk about it now… Father — ugh, they came one night and took him away, and he's been gone since then, he's been gone for thirty years, we'll talk about it some other time, oh, not now, not now… The scar on his shoulder — oh, don't ask, now is not the time…

Their secrets have become our secrets, their scars, our scars. The secrets have somehow caught up with us, have somehow come upon us without our knowing it. They are already inside us, inside our language: in what it says, in what it can never say. In our dreams too — which are not our dreams. These secrets have marked us with their presence, they have marked this little world we share, the springs and summers, this lawn, the sky, our garden. Everything is marked by the secrets of others. The crocuses are marked too. One fine day we will crouch down by the crocus bed, we will look into the earth, dig here and there, and who knows what we will find.

We will find nothing. None of this is visible on the surface: the secret is heavy, it presses, and lays wide open between us — like the promise « we'll talk about it some other time », that never comes, but is still present. And it is hidden, but it is felt — hovering in the air, saturating our space of interjections. Oh, how tired I am… Ah, I cannot tell you more now… You see that scar… remember it! Ah, if you knew, oh, if I could tell you… Just *ah* and just *oh*: a string of words unspoken, of voices unheard, moment by moment, year by year, until we grow as young wheat, until we ripen like yellow pears. Thirty years — and our life passes along with them.

What we don't pay attention to, the cries we carry within our bodies, without being able to hear them. The whole lawn in front of the house is

planted with crocuses. Spring passes, then summer, then autumn, then winter comes — it gets dark early, all the people become sad, withdraw into themselves, they talk less and less to each other. Then there is no « we » anymore, during the winter everyone has gradually become « they ». The others with their annoying *ah*'s and *oh*'s, with their old-age howling, with their unbearable complaints and grievances.

Interjections discreetly suggest words never spoken before — words that can never be spoken. « That's not a tale to tell! » as my grandmother used to say. The interjections hide and reveal it at the same time. The unspoken words of others — they are the secrets of others. Why is it sometimes warm inside and cold outside, and sometimes warm outside and very, very cold inside?

Without ever realizing it, we wander among the interjections of others — among the half-spoken, unformed words mixed with silences. Sometimes we find it difficult to navigate them, we wander, we get confused: we are supposed to be a family, young and old, but there is so much we don't know about each other. We have lived together all our lives and yet we still don't know. We hear the words, we accept the silences, we answer the questions, we are used to the interjections. Life goes on. That is the secret.

A secret, as an old Bulgarian saying has it, is « a place in a river where the water flows peacefully and is deep ». Are we talking about such secrets here? The secrets — where life seems to flow peacefully, but where unexpectedly — with a little interjection perhaps, with an ah or oh — unsuspected depths are revealed? In these depths, each « we » seems to split at the seams to become « they » — the others, the strangers in the heart who are also ours, dear, beloved.

Someone has been gone for thirty years, and for thirty years others have been waiting for him to come home.

All these years we have talked so much, and said so little — the most important thing seems to elude us: another time, oh, not now. But the most important thing cannot be said at all, it can only be witnessed. You witness the most important thing, because language cannot convey it, only the trembling of a body can, words cannot express it, only the quavers of a

voice, not memories but the breaths taken in and out, only the interjections in which the trembling of the body, the quavers in the voice and the breaths taken make a whole.



Looking around, we see things in the house in a new way — we see them breaking, freezing, falling asleep, like in a surreal painting. We enter rooms that have gathered time, memories, seasons and colors; on the living room table a bouquet of freshly picked crocuses, two cups of coffee, an ashtray with cigarette butts. In the kitchen — a plate of unfinished eggs; in the bedroom — a body that doesn't move, a sleeping body, a dreaming body, perhaps a dying body; and in the bathroom — mold. Where are the others? Oh, the others have been gone for thirty years, for thirty years we have been waiting for them to come home.

Suddenly we feel the interjections descending on us like a swarm of flies, buzzing, disturbing, tormenting: an inescapable army of *oh*'s, *ah*'s, *eh*'s. We can't understand what they're saying to us, we can't hear their words, because the words are long gone, because there are no words.

Overwhelmed by interjections, broken by their presence in the empty house, we continue to wander — through the depths of a life that unfolds most peacefully. The others are gone. It is colder inside than outside. Why is that? The night has penetrated the beds, the furniture, the bookshelves, the cupboards, the curtains. In the visible, nothing is seen.

The others are gone, but their secrets are still with us. The objects left behind seem to have retained their interjections. Now they are the bearers of interjections. More than that, they are the interjections themselves. The dirty plate — an *oh*; the tablecloth with the stains on it — another *ah*; the ashtray with the cigarette butts — an *oh;* the yellowed photograph on the wall — another *ah*. A handful of dust on the cupboard, brought from some

unknown, distant place, with its eerie presence. A museum of materialized whispers, of secrets made tangible.



You have been affected, impacted by a truth, by a secret. What will you do now? Nothing but this: you will bear witness — with the trembling of your body, with the quavers in your voice, with every breath you take in and out. You will bear witness — to that which cannot be spoken of, to that which cannot be represented. You yourself have become an interjection — a moment in the infinite movement of truth.

You are the witness.

It is you. You keep looking around you.

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In the second half of the twentieth century, countless individuals in Bulgaria, including political dissidents, peasants, artists, queer people, Muslim minorities, and ordinary citizens who opposed the regime's ideology, were forcibly sent to labor camps without trial. They suffered persecution, forced resettlement, and attempts at ethnic assimilation.

After leaving the camps, survivors were forced to remain silent. Even if they wanted to talk, there was no one to hear their stories: anyone approaching survivors could get in trouble with the authorities. There was even an official term in public discourse, « affected by the actions of the People's Power » to signify an ideologically unreliable person who does not share the ideals and values of the regime — a potential spy, a hooligan, a saboteur. The term often applied to the relatives of survivors, who were denied the right to

study at university because « there are people in the family who are affected by the actions of the people's power ».

They were silent, rarely speaking about the camps even to their family members. Descendants often find out accidentally and many years later, overhearing a few dropped words during a conversation, that their grandparents had been sent to a camp. Or they simply know that *something* happened to their grandparents, that they were once in… oh, a camp… The memories fade, the secrets have been silenced, but they live on in families and are passed on through generations. Witnessing, narrating what had been experienced, dealing and working through the trauma, incorporating the unsymbolized into the order of the symbolic, cannot take place when the necessary public space for such working-through — a space of collective sharing and healing — is lacking.

Some things *must* remain unsaid — they simply cannot be said. This does not mean that they *cannot* be expressed, but that their expression can only be achieved through a passing — between the invisible and the visible, and through a translation of the unsayable into the realm of the sayable. What is spoken, however, does not merely convey information, but creates a certain presence. Some would say that this presence is the function of art — to translate the invisible into the visible, the unsayable into the realm of the sayable.

Survivors chose to call themselves « repressed » — a term whose psychoanalytic meaning is well known. In this case it means not only that they have been victims of violence, but also that, as victims of violence, they are subsequently forced into silence. They live a life with their loved ones — crammed into small and gloomy apartments or in some unsightly houses in the distant countryside, a life that nobody cares about, left to them by mercy. A life without meaning of life.

Since 1990, efforts to implement transitional justice to confront the enduring effects of repression have faltered due to insufficient political commitment. The memories of survivors have been marginalized within

societal discourse, and the more extensive narrative of state violence has effectively been excised from public dialogue.



The installation *The Neighbours*, representing Bulgaria in the 60th Venice Biennale, is an attempt to give the voices of the repressed a space to be heard. The work — we read just before we enter the exhibition — « excavates the silenced and faded memories of survivors of state violence from Bulgaria's socialist era ». At the core of this multidisciplinary study are forty interviews with camp and prison survivors. The artists recreate fragments from the survivors' homes and evoke the material and psychological spaces where the interviews took place. We enter the installation and we walk through the rooms of the survivors, we hear their voices.

We all live our ordinary lives — we have breakfast, we go to work, get tired, read books, stand in the garden, rest and admire the flowers, look at the sky, then we go inside, open cupboards and drawers — and come across the same questions. The questions from the old cupboards.

Let us not be in a hurry to answer them, let us listen to them, let us stay with them — us and the questions, together. Some things cannot be said — oh they go beyond the mind and imagination — but they can be witnessed nonetheless.

Communism Prison

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