Vigdis Hjorth (born 1959) is a Norwegian novelist whose work has been recognised by many prizes. She writes about the dilemmas of living in modern society; her characters struggle to come to terms with a rapidly changing world and to find a meaningful way to integrate with others and realise their own potential. In this novel she combines the political with the personal, as she also does in Snakk til meg (Talk To Me, 2010), about the problems of a long-distance intercultural relationship, and Leve Posthornet! (Long Live the Postal Service! 2012), which examines the clash between local, ‘people-friendly’ services and global corporations. Her latest novel, Arv og miljø (Inheritance and Environment, 2016), a searing account of sexual abuse, has aroused heated debate about the relationship between fiction and reality.

Charlotte Barslund has translated several Norwegian and Danish writers, including Jo Nesbø and Karin Fossum. Her translation of Per Petterson’s I Curse the River of Time was shortlisted for the Independent 2011 Foreign Fiction award, and that of Carsten Jensen’s We, the Drowned was nominated for the 2016 International Dublin Literary Award.
Some other books from Norvik Press

Kjell Askildsen: *A Sudden Liberating Thought* (translated by Sverre Lyngstad)

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Jens Bjørneboe: *Powderhouse* (translated by Esther Greenleaf Mürer)

Jens Bjørneboe: *The Silence* (translated by Esther Greenleaf Mürer)

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Peter Fjågesund: *Knut Hamsun Abroad: International Reception*

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Jonas Lie: *The Family at Gilje* (translated by Marie Wells)

Amalie Skram: *Fru Inés* (translated by Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick)

Amalie Skram: *Lucie* (translated by Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick)


Helene Uri: *Honey Tongues* (translated by Kari Dickson)
Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we;

William Blake
When Alma got divorced at the age of thirty-two, she moved into a run-down, timber-built house near where the father of her children continued to live. They had shared custody, alternating weeks, so she was delighted to find a property just a few hundred metres from his, with only a tree-covered hill separating them, and pleased that her inheritance allowed her to buy it. Without that money, she would never have managed to stay in this relatively affluent neighbourhood. The house had formerly belonged to a man who had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital where he died. It had stood empty for two years and it showed, the large plot was overgrown. For reasons unknown to her, the house was now owned by a bank in Sør-Trøndelag that was keen to get rid of it, and it was therefore very reasonably priced. She was never given any further details; all she got was a file full of papers, all of which turned out to be useless. As far as she could see, the house had been very much a DIY project; the water pipes supplying the bathroom had been laid along the external walls where they froze every winter so Alma had to thaw them with a hairdryer. And while many of the windows couldn’t be closed, others refused to open, so there was a considerable amount of work to be done. The previous owner had left behind a few items of furniture, including an old safe which appeared to contain something; she could feel it every time she tried to shift it. On the rare occasions when she had a party, she and her guests would try to open it, invariably
without success. I’ll treat it as my pension plan, Alma decided as she recalled the day she let herself into the house after going to the council office to sign the deed of conveyance, how proud she had felt that she now owned it. She had never owned property before and she had walked through the rooms, touching the walls. The house came with a small, adjacent annexe that she could rent out and thus provide herself with a legal, monthly and tax-free income, which would come in handy as her earnings as a textile artist were uncertain and irregular. The annexe consisted of a small hallway, a bedroom, a very narrow galley kitchen and an equally small and narrow bathroom with no underfloor heating. From the ground floor a narrow staircase followed the incline of the terrain up to a small living room with pine flooring, a pine ceiling and pine panelling on all the walls, which made it look like a sauna. The large windows overlooking the dense forest on all sides gave her the feeling of standing in the middle of a jungle; she had bought the house in early autumn and the leaves had yet to fall from the trees. It would be lovely not to put any furniture in this room, she thought, but renting it out furnished was more lucrative, so she decided to buy some cheap bits and pieces. She could not remember now how much rent she had originally charged for the small apartment almost twenty years ago; electricity was included because the apartment didn’t have its own meter. But it did have its own entrance fifteen metres from her front door, and it was private, barely visible from the road, hidden behind the towering trees. The apartment stretched like a thin sausage from the main house and up to the wood. They shared only one wall. The end wall of one of Alma’s children’s bedrooms was a wall in the bedroom of the apartment. Noise travelled, they soon discovered, but it didn’t matter all that much. Her tenants were mostly single students or recently qualified men who had found employment at the industrial estate on the other side of the motorway a few kilometres away. Nor were they likely to want to live a life of luxury, or they would not have chosen such relatively primitive
accommodation. It was a place for someone who doesn’t mind much how they live, who just needs a bed and temporary lodgings. And although she found placing the adverts and organising the viewings a nuisance, she preferred that to becoming involved with, or having to get to know, her tenant and thus feeling less free. She wanted to be left in peace to concentrate on her own priorities, her tapestries, the yarns, the wording on the canvas; having to make small talk with her neighbours was not for her. At times after a viewing when people wrote down their name and telephone number to show they were interested, they would add in brackets that they might be willing to pay another five hundred kroner per month to get the apartment. Single parents or people with a dog who were attracted to its rural location and scenery. But she didn’t want dogs or young children around who might start playing with hers, running in and out of her house as they pleased and making her relationship with her tenant more complicated than a purely business arrangement. No, she preferred single men who worked round the clock. Every time someone like that moved in, she heaved a sigh of relief; now money would be coming in every month, possibly for a whole year. Few stayed longer than that. Then she would place a new ad and organise fresh viewings. Occasionally the apartment would be vacant for one month or two or even three. If people moved out unexpectedly for various reasons, for example, if a student left halfway through a term, she would advertise in the local paper, but sometimes the replies were slow in coming because the property market was in a depressed state or because it was the wrong time of year or because the people who did come to view it felt the rent was too high for what they were getting. It was the absence of underfloor heating in the bathroom or the very small fridge or the fact that there was no cable TV. On the other hand, there was plenty of parking and a bus stop close by. People have different priorities. If the apartment was vacant for a month or two, she might take a rash decision and let it to dubious people with ready cash. When it was empty, she felt as if she
were losing money every day and it made her twitchy. Then she would sign the simplified agreement she had drawn up with the help of a friend who worked as an estate agent and which was probably not entirely in accordance with current rental legislation. And her tenant would sign it without complying with the requirement for two months’ rent as a deposit, because the people who tempted her with the first month’s rent in cash were just as impatient as she was to get the business formalities over and done with. Once a man moved in on the very same day he had viewed the apartment; she remembered him asking her if she could provide him with a duvet. So the demand for a deposit was postponed and later it became rather inconvenient to bring it up. Besides, desperate tenants were unlikely to be able to come up with a deposit of two months’ rent, so if she had insisted on their complying with the contract, they would have left and she would have had to re-advertise. And anyway, it was awkward to have to go to the bank with them, pick a number for the queue and make small talk while they waited their turn. She didn’t want to have anything to do with her tenants, she didn’t want to see them; she just wanted the money going into her bank account every month and then to forget that they were there. Besides, she told herself, how much damage could they do? Of course there had been occasions where people failed to pay and didn’t respond when she reminded them, and suddenly they might be gone; once when she had rented a cheap cabin in the mountains for herself and was working there on a banner, a Finnish couple disappeared. She hadn’t seen them for weeks and their car had gone; she didn’t care about that, but when their rent was overdue, then she started to worry: how long should she wait before she took action and how? She noticed that their things were still in the apartment when she let herself in and inspected them with mixed emotions; they must have some kind of value, at least to them? Personal papers and framed photographs of people they must surely care about. A television and computers, piles of clothing and household articles and toiletries, completely
different products from the ones she bought for herself. Their belongings can act as a kind of guarantee, she decided, as time passed and her expected monthly income remained outstanding. Should she take on the huge job of packing up their belongings and cleaning the place so that it could be let out to new tenants? But what if they came back? Was she allowed to do that? She rang the National Landlords Association which her insurance company had insisted that she joined; they told her she had to send her tenant a notice of termination as a result of their failure to pay, by post. But they don’t collect their post, she objected. She was told she should send the letter by registered post; although the tenants would never sign for it, it would constitute evidence of notice of termination. So that was what she did, and she watched how the card from the post office lay untouched in the letter box belonging to the apartment as other correspondence, postcards and bank letters built up, and she wondered whether she should open and read them. Everything stayed where it was, their letters, their belongings, and the rent money didn’t appear in the account where it should be. So Alma let herself in and turned down the radiators so as not to waste electricity and lose more money, it felt as the money was slipping away between her fingers. She called the National Landlords Association to ask how long she had to wait before she could clear out the apartment and re-let it, and they said that, strictly speaking, she ought to contact the police and register the couple as missing. So she went to the police station to explain her situation, and the National Landlords Association had been right, the police had to issue a missing person’s notice before she could do anything. So the police issued a missing person’s notice at her request, not because she worried that something might have happened to them, but purely because once the police had confirmed that the couple was resident elsewhere, the tenancy agreement could be considered void. She received a hefty bill from the police for their efforts, but heard nothing further; presumably this kind of investigation was low priority. She should have
insisted on a deposit, she told herself. Two weeks after contacting the police, she went on a pre-Christmas trip to Berlin with her children, and when they returned, the apartment had been cleared out. The Finnish couple must have been spying on her, waiting until they saw the family leave the lights off for several days in a row. Without consulting the National Landlords Association or the police, Alma made up her mind to regard the tenancy as terminated. She cleaned the apartment, threw away anything they hadn’t taken with them and which had no value, old tablecloths, scorched oven gloves, manky washing-up brushes, and felt a strong sense of moral outrage as she did it. That she had to clear up their mess. That they had known it when they left, leaving behind stuff like their soiled lavatory brush, that she would have to pick it up and dispose of it. That she would have to clean the lavatory and the remove stains they had made on the bathroom floor. She washed and she scrubbed and she aired the apartment and she bought a new shower curtain and replaced missing forks and glasses. Yes, there was no doubt that it involved a great deal of unforeseen work, but overall, having an apartment like that as part of her house was an advantage. At that point she also had a lovely terrace, courtesy of a Danish builder before he too disappeared. When she hadn’t seen him or his car or received rent for three months, she let herself into the apartment and confiscated the tools he had left behind because she hadn’t asked him for a deposit either, her impatience having got the better of her yet again. When he failed to come back, she began – without checking with the police or the National Landlords Association – to put his numerous possessions into bin liners, which she stored in her garage. Anything she thought might have value and which she believed she could sell, she kept locked up in her own house. When the man finally reappeared and found the apartment cleared out, he knocked on her door asking about his things. She said he wouldn’t get them back until he paid her the outstanding rent. He didn’t appear to be able to do that nor was he willing to. Then his things would remain hers,
she declared, astonished at her own firmness, she had become hardened, she had become strict. You can’t take my stuff, the Dane stuttered, but she could and she did. She said there were some things of his in the garage which he was welcome to take. She stood behind the curtain, watching him haul the bin liners into his van. For a week she worried that she would hear from him again, wondering if she would receive some kind of demand, if he would go to a lawyer or the police, but she told herself that the risk was low since it was he who had defaulted on their agreement. She never heard from him again or indeed anyone else. She cleaned the apartment, bought forks and glasses, replaced the shower curtain, made new curtains and matching cushions from fabric remnants, put an ad in the paper and rented out the apartment to a woman with a dog. It was not until the agreement had been signed that she drove to Lierbygda and sold the tools that used to belong to the Danish builder to a DIY shop. They seemed to think they were dealing with stolen goods even though she was upfront about her situation, but they bought them all the same. She sold the big barbecue and the office chair on www.finn.no. She continued to get the odd letter addressed to the Dane, Toni Hansen was his name, from banks to which he owed money.

Seven years ago the apartment had become vacant again. Alma had put an ad in the local paper and was getting impatient because there were no replies and time was money. She was contemplating re-advertising it at a reduced rent when she got a call from a man speaking broken English who wanted to view the apartment right away. Half an hour later an old car with Polish plates pulled up in her drive, and somehow that felt reassuring. In the thirty minutes that had passed since their conversation, she had wondered what nationality his broken English concealed. Not that it really mattered, she would be happy to take multicultural tenants, or whatever the current term was, but being able to speak to them would be an advantage. Once
in a similar situation, she had responded to an ad from the council seeking accommodation for a family of refugees. She remembered dialling the number with that smug feeling of satisfaction you experience when you think you’ve acted more honourably and with less prejudice than your fellow human beings, but as soon as her call was answered that feeling was replaced with anxiety. Images of veiled women, unemployed men, large numbers of children and clothes hanging on washing lines between the trees flashed through her mind, so when the council concluded that her apartment was too small for the family in question, she breathed a sigh of relief. But thank you for calling, the council officer said, wanting to give her a compliment she hadn’t deserved. When the car that now arrived turned out to have Polish plates, she felt relief, although she was loath to admit it. And when the man who got out of the driver’s seat turned out to be tall and quite good-looking, despite a chipped canine tooth, and when the woman who got out from the passenger side turned out to be young and blonde and smiley, she was reassured. The man did the talking in his broken English, but managed to communicate without any major difficulties that he was able to pay a month’s rent upfront. Alma showed them the apartment, as always with a feeling of unease at having to ‘sell’ it; she was ashamed of its poor state.

The Poles, however, appeared to like what they saw. It was late summer, golden afternoon light poured through the windows and outside the leaves on the trees rustled in the warm wind. The Polish woman had a slightly rounded stomach, she must be pregnant, Alma thought, but she pretended not to notice and didn’t want to think about it because the Polish woman smiled like a young girl and touched the flimsy, eggshell-coloured, almost transparent cotton curtains with affection. Alma had made them and put them up and they gave the room a dreamy quality. And she had mounted one of her less important works above the double bed; an embroidered picture of a tiny coltsfoot in
bud and a Hans Christian Andersen quote: ‘Just living is not enough. You must have sunshine, freedom and a little flower.’

The man asked where they could do their laundry and Alma’s eyes flickered. She had promised herself that she wouldn’t let her next tenants use the laundry room in her basement. In the past they had been allowed to use it; they could let themselves in from the garage, but it troubled her that it also gave them access to the rest of her house because there was no lockable door between the laundry room and her hall. It had worried her a few times when she had been away, the thought of how vulnerable all her possessions were. Besides, tenants did a lot of laundry, never once thinking of the cost of electricity. They could easily wash two, three loads at a time and at high temperatures, 60° or 90°, she noticed when she checked the laundry room once she had heard the garage door open and then close again. But seeing as the apartment had been empty for months when the Polish man asked about laundry facilities, she ushered the couple into the basement through the garage door and showed them the washing machine and the tumble dryer, and they nodded contentedly and the young woman beamed at Alma. From the basement they walked up into the living room which Alma had tidied for the occasion; she printed out two copies of the tenancy agreement and the man signed them and Alma signed them and money was counted and changed hands, keys were handed over, both for the apartment and the laundry room, and they agreed to sort out the deposit at a later date.

The couple moved in the very next day. Or at least Alma saw the man and the car several times as he carried things into the apartment before driving off again. Alma presumed that the woman was inside the apartment as the lights were now on. They looked like a nice couple. One day she was invited in and the man showed her that he had painted the bedroom in anticipation of the new baby. It looked much