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365 SENTENCES

Translated from the Croatian by Jacob Eoin Agee

“Yes, the period in the sentence – it's what makes us human, Ma, I swear. It lets us stop in order to keep going.”

– Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Every kind of disconnected idea floats into your mind when you are tormented by a surplus of thoughts; such as, for example, the idea that over the course of one year, in a special document opened just for this purpose, every day, whatever is up and whatever has happened to you, you will write down just one single sentence – no less, nor more than that.

If you live in such a way that you consider a day without a written-down sentence – even a superficial sentence – to be lost, then that one daily sentence can render one whole year meaningful, day by day.

Out of three hundred and sixty-five sentences, you just might find that one true, singular, most important one, that sentence around which the other three hundred and sixty-four are simple movie extras; but even if there is no such special sentence, a written trace will remain of one unusual sentence-themed year, such as you've never experienced before.

Language is the one daily wonder you must believe in, alongside life itself, the latter being a daily wonder of yours only while it lasts – unlike language, which lives on with others, so that then, when your life ends, that means that this sentence, and all the other sentences of yours which you have saved by writing down – will outlive you.

Five days was enough for you to convince yourself that this experiment makes sense; and so now, all that's left for you to do is to note down, each day, one thought which – in contrast to all those other thoughts you have thought but left at that – you have saved, however unimportant it is.

You could write about the world in which you live; but now, you choose to pass it over in silence, because it jumps out from everywhere and at everyone – and moreover is ugly, unjust, dirty and evil; and so here at least you'll remove its power to contaminate and sadden you – and to the end of the year at least, you will not mention it here.

It's January, but that is now so insignificant, because this is a sentence that could have been identical but with some other month at its beginning; and once you have grasped this, you think of how, in fact, it really is easy to find a shelter within which it is unimportant which day it is, which season, what time of day, or how much of anything is left in a day, or a year, or even in the life allotted you; and how precious exactly such moments are in which nothing is measured, and quantities and times do not count – only choice words.

In today's close-up, you have your own home, that place that you live in and that brings you peace; that place you would prefer to capitalise when writing so that the depth of its Peace can be more exactly named; and now that that is said, you feel how much of a privilege it is to have that one place of your own in the world which you are able to call a home, after a life during which you have changed many habitats and abodes but which you could not have called homes.

Perhaps all you need is a lexicon of everything you can grasp, so that you do not sink into thoughtlessness, superficiality – because although you have never felt total thoughtlessness, still you are afraid of it, you are scared that it could catch you by surprise, ambush you if you do not remind yourself of all those small but powerful, valuable things that deliver you from it; and so you read these out slowly, spell them out, until they transform into a melody of language able, at least for you, to overrule this threatening thoughtlessness.

You write, you walk, you read, you cultivate vegetables in your garden, you cook your own healthy meals, and you know that it is all the same whether any of this will be noted down; but again, you always have the need to leave some trace, as if it is your assignment to write out for yourself a manifest of one completely normal existence, so as to convince yourself that even within such an existence, it is possible to breathe a new sense in, as long as it is noted down.

You ask yourself why you write in the second person, why you address the person who is writing, instead of allowing them to speak up from out of their own skin; but still, you decide to keep that voice, because perhaps it is a voice you did not hear earlier even though it is yours;

because perhaps it's an occasion to see yourself from the outside – not in the way you see others, rather in the way you would see yourself if you were to attend to yourself a little more gently.

You remember how, in childhood, you passed over in silence the contents of your own head, as if you were hiding some dark secret; you even remember how you asked yourself whether this childish uncovering of thoughts, whether that beginning point of the true you, would survive growing up; and now, it is touching for you that it has survived, and that you are transforming it into this sentence which proves nothing, just gently cradles one recollection from which the person writing this now was moulded.

As you write your one daily sentence, everything else you might have done instead of this passes through your head – but nothing else is sufficiently witty to you, sufficiently beneficial, sufficiently interesting, sufficiently lunatic or sufficiently kind to divert you from this task.

You might decide, let us say, that for one month, or one week, you will exclusively write short sentences, because you know also that much can be said from all of a few words; and so you do also want to give short sentences a chance, but you cannot make decisions with the language of literature, because it is a living organism, a little animal with its own instincts which you have never managed to trick.

Today, you think of the word *melancholia*, one of the dearer words of the mother tongue; but this a case where you are drawn to a word not only because it sounds beautiful, but rather also because of its meaning, because of the condition which it describes; and this is one of those conditions not considered pleasant, though when you resign yourself to it, you discover within it a special type of luxury of a kind that neither sorrow, nor love, nor rapture of any kind are able to give you – because within melancholy there lies a certain cottony potential, from which you have involuntarily formatted the most important part of yourself, that part from which both this sentence, and all the other sentences of yours, have emerged.

You turned on some music, but stopped it after the popular singer-songwriter had sung only two verses – not because there was anything wrong with the song or the performer, but simply because every sound not silence is bothering you all the more often; and so now, you imagine yourself in a situation where somebody asks what kind of music you listen to, and you answer that silence is your favourite music, and you figure that this somebody will probably consider your answer to be funny even though, as far as you are concerned, it could not be more serious or more exact.

You are reading a book you like, and every now and then, with a coloured sticker, you mark out some sentence you want to return to sometime; and you think of how lucky a woman you are that in childhood, you came to love books so deeply; that you grew up in a time when pastimes were not digital and superficial; and that you have pulled the whole of this world – which contains thousands of worlds not yours, but that carry you along as if they were yours – through life as your most important property; and so you see, you have towed it too through your adulthood, and can still delight in another's prose as if it were your own.

You are lacking in love – but you convince yourself that it is better to lack in something you have had, than something else you would have lacked since always (and then forever).

You found in your notes a sentence from a novel by that young Vietnamese-American writer, swearing that “the period in a sentence – it's what makes us human ... it lets us to stop in order to keep going”, and today, especially today, this reverberates for you as a wonderful, intelligent, exact and powerful thought – not only vis-à-vis a text, but vis-à-vis life generally too, because without a full-stop nothing comes anew; there is no breathing space, no continuation, nor conclusion; there is no little death, of any kind, yielding space to some still unknown life; and now, much more than when you read it for the first time, you are spellbound by this thought which is, in the original, split into two sentences which you are thinking of as you write your own single sentence, onto which you will soon dot that full stop, which is here no longer just a punctuation mark, but rather a subject, perhaps even a motto of this whole sentence-themed year – during which you will record, every day, at least one full stop.

You listened to some radio show in which self-love was discussed, and this induced you to a re-examination of your love towards your own self, and the love of others towards their own selves generally – but you concluded that it is maybe a mere misnomer, because it draws on self-loving, which is easily exaggerated; while what seems to you much more important than this self-love self-promoted all around you, and completely sufficient, is just to have an understanding of yourself and be gentle on yourself in the same way we would be gentle towards anyone dear to us.

Your mood today is *mol*, in a minor key – that word at first crossed through your head right away when you wondered how you are; but since you sometimes use words arbitrarily – especially whenever you’re scattering metaphors around – you consulted one of our language’s dictionaries, to convince yourself that *mol* does indeed mean “a type of musical key”; though it also means “a place built for berthing boats” – a quay – as well as meaning a “hake” in your homeplace; but thanks to the dictionary, you found out that *mol.*, with a full stop, is also the symbol for a quantity of matter which contains as many elementary units as there are atoms in 0.012 kilograms of carbon, which surprised you as much as it would have surprised anyone conceited enough to think they know the vocabulary of their own language down to the final word.

You have imagined enough other worlds in escaping your own; but these imagined worlds then also became your homes.

Nobody knows of this daily sentence-dispenser of yours; you have confided in no one about it; but with it, you have come to comprehend that for a long time, you have not had a secret of any kind, and have forgotten how good it is to have secrets, as it means that something exciting is happening to you in life; and since you have nothing now more exciting than this notebook, you will hide it farther away, as if you were hiding away a lover, or some shamelessly expensive thing which you have bought even though you could have not.

You remember it exactly: you fell in love with language at seven years old, in an instant when you had reflected on the meaning of the word *life*, and you stayed like that – caught red-handed in comprehending how much power language has when that small, single word of four letters encloses everything you will ever experience.

You have lit a fire in the fireplace; you were missing the ambience, which you usually save so as to not use it all up, so as to keep it from becoming something that goes without saying (because you already know that one easily becomes accustomed to many things that one should not take for granted); for then that atmosphere, the flame in the fireplace's frame, can be watched for hours like the most exciting television program, can last your whole evening and bring to your day the kind of difference you yearn for on those days of yours without any fire, literal or metaphorical.

You love it when the house whistles from the wind, when the flora around swings and dances as if nature has some anniversary of its own, some celebration you are not invited to, but which you are allowed to peer out at from behind the glass in your windows, like a normal human mammal who has merited this privilege by having decided on a life in nature, and so who now has the opportunity to watch how the treetops change their hairdos under the force of the tempest.

Of late, you have been noticing an inclination within yourself towards so-called banal things as literary material, and as material for serious conversation – because why should we pretend that within our lives, such things as nail cutting do not exist, or taking out the trash, wiping away dust or washing the window panes, scrubbing the toilet bowl, replacing a roll of toilet paper, spreading out washed laundry, making purchases and standing in line at the checkout; for is this too not life, is this too not ours as much as all those “big” topics we haul into the foreground to try and cover up the things which, in fact, hold us to life and serve it.

You are obstinate to the point of madness – you deliberately will not write “becoming mentally ill” because it is not said like that, and because such speech as this must not be a slave to orthography – but yes, you are obstinate (though you would prefer to call this persistence), and however much that trait of yours, that bullish characteristic, does tend to extract you from those unenviable situations in life, it does always get a little on your nerves when you feel that you cannot quit it – for example, now, at the end of the first month of this year which you have so lightly proclaimed as a year of sentences, you are asking yourself how much sense this even makes, but you know yourself well enough to know that you will persist, and that that one sentence a day is now a question of life and death to you, a spite for which, unfortunately – or maybe fortunately too – there is simply no cure.

“Take it slowly”, says a neighbour you met taking a walk, and you immediately proclaim this word to yourself as the word of the day, of the week, maybe even of the whole month; because it is so soft and good-natured and well-disposed towards yourself and others; it is, in fact, one whole way of life which ought to be adopted and applied to everything we do, a motto of one moderate existence within everything; and within this moderate existence everything might then be possible slowly, little by little, so that everything within it would not be big, but rather everything would be at the right time and sufficient enough for nothing to be lacking.

Recently, poetry has been giving you answers; you have been reaching out for the collections in your own library, and opening the pages at random – as if telling fortunes – as if, within the poem that you open, there will be some answer to a question not even posed, an answer which has materialised before you manage to ask its question, and then in fact it will happen that, because of some stanza, your thoughts will go off down some byway you did not expect, but you had to be led off down exactly that byway in order to convince yourself again of how good it is that others write poetry; though not you, absolutely not you, your role is to read it and sometimes to speak and write about it – just like now.

In life, you have not told many lies, and those lies that you have told were mainly for the benefit of the person to whom you were lying; but if you wished to make out a lifelong balance sheet

of your lying, surely it would show that the lie you have most often told, is saying you are well after someone has asked you how you are.

When you woke up, it was still dark – but you have nothing against this morning winter dark, for within it there is a potential you do not have on those mornings when the light of day immediately drives you into some kind of action, into movement and participation; and now, as you think about this, you are not surprised at all by all that film ruined by having been taken out of cameras into the light, instead of into a darkroom.

Even when you have no thought worthy of being written down, when you have nothing *intelligent* to say, this itself can be noted down, and from this, word by word, a sentence can be formed.

You hope no one will ever figure that you are teaching anybody anything: because most of the time, you yourself think that really you have no idea about anything, and that the whole time you have existed, you have been learning – learning about the world, about mice and men, about books, about cats, about food, about yourself, about survival of every kind – and also that what you are now doing is just one more variant of this endless schooling which, in many situations, has refuted your own self, because something which, yesterday, you confidently knew, already the following day is shown to be off the mark, or questionable at least.

There is some secret connection between you and victuals, because of which you do not understand the concept of a recipe at all; for as soon as you see some victuals, as soon as you take them into your hands – whether it is meat, or fish, or vegetables, or cereals, or legumes – you simply know what needs to be done for them to become a meal, and a tasty meal at that; and you know too that this has no connection with any kind of apprenticeship in anyone's kitchen, because it has been like this since forever, for already as a child you were pottering about masterfully in the kitchen, and you already knew then that this would be the one talent of yours which you would never, even for a moment, mistrust.

Just as it is possible to have high-quality silence with some person – which is exceptionally rare – it is likewise also possible to have high quality silence with your own sentence notebook.

You know that there always exists a right moment for everything, and this is simply indisputable if you put any faith in the feeling that something is ripe to be done, said, shifted, changed, to happen just then, right then or never; or else it will happen at some other totally missed time, if you let that moment slip – for there even exist the right moments for mistakes, and it is not wise to not make mistakes at those very moments.

Sometimes you glance back on your own past, on all of your own lives before this one you are living now, and every time it bewilders you how many lives it is possible to live within this one single life; and so you become frightened, that some twist might still take you by surprise, something not even in the back of your head, let alone in the foreground; but then these fears grow up into inquisitiveness about what this twist might be, and what this life could be instead of the life you like – but there have certain previous lives you also liked but which were later transformed, most often for the better.

You were born in an analogue world and you remember it joyfully, but, you love to an almost sinful extent all the devices and possibilities of the digital age – you believe that when it comes to a smartphone, the adjective does really fit; you no longer write anything by hand, because you adore the keyboards and the ability to put finishing touches onto and change a typed text later; you are thankful for all the channels of communication which enable your presence even where you are not physically present; as soon as some interesting new gadget for note-taking and writing appears, you want to have it; and you wonder, if the world has advanced just your life so much, what more there might be around the corner that you can barely wait for; and what more there might be, but which you will not even live to see.

Today, you are indescribably thankful that you can wash the bedclothes in the morning, hang them out on the *tiramol*, and after a few hours of drying in the winter sun and winds, return them right back to the bed.

Today, you conclude that certain people should *never* be free to die; especially not before us.

Although you often see planes as they fly over, today, for the first time since you grew up, you remembered how, in childhood, you would all wave up at the sky whenever you would see a plane; and how completely convinced you all would be, that those people, high up in the plane, had seen you.

It always surprises you how your body reacts to illness, how grateful it is to you for you having succumbed to the cold, a virus, flu – like it could barely wait for you to give it the chance to take a vacation from every endeavour and every undertaking, so that it might take its own little break from exertions of any kind and spend a few days horizontally instead of vertically.

You think of something, anything: this is a language in which generally you keep quiet, but now you are reassessing whether there is, or ever will be, unease connected to the fact that one day others might be able to read these sentences on which your brain had had a monopoly until you recklessly decided to write one of them down each day.

You knew a woman whose husband was bothered by the fact that she reads, but she did not see any maltreatment in this – instead, she would tell of how this was proof of great love; because if he is jealous of a book, how could he be jealous of the other man, the one she was continuously searching for her on her mobile, or enticing with her clothes and her smile (although there was no such other man).

You are chatting today with artificial intelligence; you are amused by the possibility of communicating with someone who is not a living being, yet still knows an awful lot; but it is not interesting for you to ask of it things which you do not know, because you were able to do so earlier too on various search engines, so you ask something comical, attempting to confuse him/her/it, your artificial interlocutor – for example, what he/she/it thinks about the fact that you are drinking a glass of wine, to which he/she/it answers that, as an AI language model, he/she/it does not have personal emotions or physiological reactions, and so is not able to form real thoughts or feelings, but is able to offer you information about the benefits or harms of consuming alcohol and advises, if you are of legal age, a moderate consumption of alcohol, which can be a relaxing experience.

Sometimes, secretly, you wish that somebody would console you, hug you with care and repeat to you that everything will be all right.

Why do you not have a single question sentence, why is this your first one and why do you not have an answer to this question?

You consider if, in fact, sorrow has a longer-lasting time limit than joy – or whether this maybe only seems to be the case because sorrow must be endured, in contrast to joy, which we experience in an unnoticed state.

Once, a writer dear to you wrote that one must not become numb to reality, and this sentence periodically returns to you in your life as an admonition, or as an instruction for the use of a day; and so you start seeking those details of reality to which you have perhaps become numb, and so you discover a shawl which has been given the status of a curtain on your window, the beautiful colour of your own plates, the disorder on the work desk which proves that you are writing something, or a small bird pausing from flight on the electricity line in front of your window; and over all of this the sky, wintry blue today; and although you are not exactly sure whether the sky is falling into that reality which one must not become blunted to, it is all the same, because you comprehend that you still have not become numb – because *you see* and

you notice and you feel, in harmony with it, and feeling is the key that can unlock every such numbness.

Do not be so deathly serious.