

# THE BOUNDARY

## ELISE KARLSSON

**Gränsen** 

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## Synopsis

Emma has reached a comfortable position as middle-manager at a company producing management self-help books. An open-plan office in a glass building; the coffee machine, the meetings, the conferences, the product to be sold on a market. (The eternal question: what does the market want now?) The self-help books are published according to plan, but society outside the office is rapidly changing. The line between those on the inside and those on the outside becomes more severe, stretching along the boundaries of the country.

Emma needs surgery, something is removed from her stomach and afterwards, her robotic-like commitment to work changes. She becomes interested in relationships, wellness, politics, and embraces it all with the same obsession she previously only instilled in her work. She aims to be the best partner, the best at relaxing, the best at engaging herself. Her body becomes her project. Breathing is everything. But does it mean anything? “We fill the ocean with the dead. We fill the ocean with debris. We lose the sense of what is what.” Something is amiss, and an insight is starting to take form within her.

## Introduction

by Nina Eidem, Senior Editor Natur & Kultur

Elise Karlsson is one of the most interesting writers at work in Sweden today. I love editing Elise because of the complexity of her thinking. The voice in these two books is laconic, pared-down, cerebral but not difficult. Rather, she writes with a rare precision, cracks open big ideas with simple, elegant sentences. She is a political writer who debates issues of feminism and class in the public sphere. She was one of the few women to come out publicly with a sexual harassment accusation against Jean Claude Arnault, the man whose actions led to the downfall of the Swedish Academy.

I published her novel *Linjen* a few years ago. It is a slight book but very ambitious in scope. In the character Emma, who is unemployed at the start of the novel, then manages to “get in” working for a self help publisher, Elise has created a mirror for the reader to look in, look away from, wrestle with.

*Linjen* is about the lines dividing those on the outside from those on the inside, the subtle workings of power, hierarchies, status and the turn toward “work” as an identity project. It’s an issue novel, and we published it right into the burgeoning conversation about work and its relationship to politics, value and meaning – a conversation that it also helped foster. There are dozens of amazing reviews. The consensus was, among reviewers, that Karlsson is an uncannily good observer of our historical moment, of our neuroses, blind spots, favorite lies, and the realities that those truths cover up.

In the follow-up to *Linjen*, *Gränsen*, we again encounter Emma. Her struggles are no longer about keeping herself afloat; she is now safely within, in a mid-level position in the company. But she falls ill, and her obsession with work starts to wane. Her body begins calling for her attention. There is a wound, and a truth about the wound – but is it in her, or in society at large? *Gränsen* is a rich, slow read, with gorgeous sentences to savor and underline. Where *Linjen* took a firm look at “work” as the political and personal obsession of our time, quietly asking what other ideas of human life that obsession forecloses, *Gränsen* reaches wider and probes conscience as an open wound; routes knowledge through the body, and the body’s pain. In the end, it is the story of a woman’s blankness starting to give way to conscience. The personal struggle is inseparable from the pain in the world.

[Sample translation, pp. 7-39]

I am in a palace called Carefree. In the picture gallery, I stop in front of a painting.

A group of men bend towards each another. Around them is total darkness. That's what I immerse myself in initially. One could linger within it; it is laid down so meticulously, as if it were a place in its own right. Some areas of it fade into the colour of earth, where the blackness meets the radiance of the invisible light source. In other areas it is like sky untouched by sunlight. The darkness becomes part of the men's garments, and of them.

It's not until you've finished with the darkness that you can see what they are actually doing: that the man with the deeply furrowed brow is jabbing a finger against or into another man. Into a furrow that is a wound. We don't know if this will convince him that the wound is genuine, if that is the reason for his unease. Everyone is focused on whether the wound is genuine, no-one on the pain.

Hani nudges me. I look around in the dim light, the dull lustre of gold leaf. Frederick the Great built this palace, a refuge from the world, and named it Sanssouci.

'Come on, it's time we went back. Time for afternoon coffee and cake.'

'God, how many times a day can we be expected to eat?'

'Every hour, every hour of every day.'

We too have left the world behind for the time being, but we're not really here to play the tourist, gawk at art and buy souvenirs. That's not what the conference is about.

It's a conference. We've been flown here to talk to each other. I am enveloped in the vapour from the jet engine, which sharpens your vision, then makes it foggier. An unsatisfactory high.

A conference is a place where you shut yourself off from the world around you and take decisions. The world around you rolls on regardless, like the sea under a ship – assuming that we are the ship. We take our decisions, and the waves roll on.

I am a manager, and I am in charge. The person in charge of a manager is their manager. The person in charge of their manager is another manager. The person in charge of that other manager is the managing director, and so on. The more specific a title, the less it means. *Le patron. Der Chef.* That's what counts. I am authority, which means I cannot free myself from authority. I'm in control, so I can keep my job: that's all that concerns me.

We travel to another place and decide people's fate: who stays, who has to go. Who gets to climb the greasy pole? On conference nights we sleep in high beds. The sheets are soft but unworn. There's a selection of different pillows. At some conferences I pick someone who follows me into the softness of the bedroom, or someone else picks me.

One night when I'm away at a conference, a pain grows within me, in my belly. I toss and turn, and I cry. Take tablets. It's only when I cry out that the pain eases slightly. What will they think of me? Next morning, when I wake up with my head on my specially selected pillow, it's gone. But then I get home and the pain comes back. The pain grows.

I am unconscious when a knife slices through my skin. I am granted the gift of the deepest sleep, wake up with my thoughts intact, my wounds bandaged. Soon they will have healed into permanent scars. What does the knife open within me?

Before, they said they were going to make a small incision, there'd be a small wound. In fact, there's a long incision, a long wound. The healing process is longer than both. Everything is bigger. Maybe I'll become a bigger person as a result.

All the patients on my ward are sunken in their pain, worn down and oblivious to each other. I have only my mobile for company. Hospital wifi. I watch videos that follow people fleeing over the sea; that's what fills my feed. They're seeking protection. They are never asleep, always awake throughout their transformation. What kind of knives do they have within them?

I lie for several days, unable to see much more than my own legs under a cover that's too thin. Like all the fabric in the room, it's faded by use and chlorine. The air in the room is sterile but not odourless. They don't spend enough time cleaning for that.

I drink liquids that look and smell like the soap you find in the outsize soap dispensers in the toilet.

I wear disposable mesh underwear.

I have a room-mate who's in a worse condition than I am.

A woman cries out every night, hour after hour. The nurse goes to check on her from time to time, but it doesn't seem to help. These interruptions mean the nurse doesn't have enough time to note down what happens to us, the patients on the ward. I know because she tells the woman so; it's a reprimand, but a pointless one. It alleviates neither pain nor insanity.

I'm given help to go home. I live on my own.

After the operation I sleep through the days. It's not restorative sleep. I can't surface from it. To get up off the sofa, I have to make an unnatural movement, twisting to one side so as not to aggravate the wound.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was going to move on without a backward glance. Not lie prostrate, staring straight in front of me. Not be a burden.

My body doesn't seem to care that I've taken control over my own life. It's not interested in my aspirations. My cells divide as they wish.

The night of the conference wasn't the first time I'd noticed; I'd long been feeling the pain whenever I ate. I tried to avoid eating, but couldn't keep it up in the long run. After that night I was obliged to seek medical assistance, submit to the doctors' knowledge of my body.

I stop contacting Hani, and I realise he isn't contacting me either. This wound is opening up something. I want to widen it and insert a finger to feel what's there, but new tissue has already begun to grow over it; it's too late.

I've got a manuscript to read at home. It's more of a security blanket than proper work: a deal between me and the office to avoid losing touch altogether. I hardly even manage to read a few pages during my first week at home.

*Self-Realisation Through Work*, the book's called. It's about working on yourself, through work. Getting to know yourself and moulding your identity: in the office, in your free time, as part of your job. The idea is improve both yourself and the work you do.

It's complicated.

My hair is beginning to smell of dust, then of rancid butter. I finally ring Hani and ask him to come over. Of course, he says. He comes over and holds me cautiously, as if I were a parcel he'd just collected but not yet had time to unpack.

He helps me to the bathroom and slips out. I take off my bathrobe, step gingerly into the bathtub as if on very aged legs, my knees pointing outwards.

The heat of the water that washes over me. That's a luxury.

Now I'm unused to the smell of soap and shampoo, I find myself sneezing again and again for the rest of the day. When I sneeze, I have to curl up into a sort of foetal position; this, too, because of the scar.

A scar runs right across me. I go to a nurse who pulls out the stitches. Now there's only me inside my body. There's a little less of me inside my body. That means it could all be over. But there are bruises, too, as big as hands, in unexpected places. And things that are stretched to breaking point somewhere inside me, if I turn or stretch. The feeling that my insides are loosening, that what happens inside and what happens outside have very little to do with each other.

It is, in fact, a different body, dreaming different dreams. I want it to let me know who I can be now. I want to be alone with it. To be allowed to bleed in peace.

Afterwards I ask if it was deadly, the thing that grew inside me.

The doctor looks harassed; this is one of those cases where it's hard to tell. Yes, and no – but what we know for sure is that it's not there any longer. I need to go for check-ups to make sure nothing comes back, but she thinks that's more a precaution than anything else.

I ask if it was any of my doing, the thing that grew inside me. Was it something I ate, something I drank, something to do with my work? No, she says, none of those; they can't find a link with anything in particular.

From 'none of those', I grasp the fact that it's my own responsibility. It's everything I do that caused it.

One day it'll snow, the next it'll be spring-like, with everything melting. What is usually hidden throughout the winter lies bare again; the worn, flattened grass in the yard in front of the building makes me blush. Exposed.

A few weeks later I'm allowed to go back to my job, but is it my job? You can never step into the same job twice.

They've replaced the coffee dispensers with a proper coffee maker. No-one explains the new coffee rules to me; they've already become second nature.

At the first middle management meeting I attend after getting back, Alexandersson gives me a puzzled look, as if he's thinking: who is she, what's she doing here? Yet I have been working here for longer than he has. His green eyes probe me, trying to find something to latch onto. All those Thai lunches we've shared, the chats about what series he's going to watch at the weekend, gone. And his face? It's just as much of a blank to me.

I come across a note I wrote to myself before going on sick leave.

You work for a firm that develops self-help titles for business, books that help people become better employees and managers. You yourself are a manager with special responsibility for liaising with clients, which involves arranging talks for companies to be given by the authors your firm works with, often as a package deal along with a given number of books.

Your password is in your wallet. There are walnuts in the second drawer under your desk, and Hani is your friend.

While I was away they recruited a new editor to our department. I'm always involved in the selection process normally. His name is Anton, but people mostly call him Ante. Hani calls him the Father of the Nation because every phrase he utters is worded as if to be used in an address to the country at large. 'My esteemed fellow-citizens,' Hani whispers to me when Anton, Ante, the Father of the Nation, starts to speak. It's odd when someone who's lower down the pecking order than you speaks to you like that. You try to put it out of your mind – what else can you do? But now it intensifies my feeling of having returned to quite a different set-up.

I'm sitting on the same office chair I usually sit on. My hands are resting in the same unergonomic position as usual on the sharp edge of the desk. Opposite me sits Hani, talking to himself in a harassed way, as he always does when the end of the production process is approaching. Yet it's not the same as usual. My feelings about the job are different, the vertigo I used to feel on looking out of the window is gone. The fear of falling. Now it's my body that induces vertigo.

I'm getting bigger. I think people are looking at me differently. I look as if I might actually come from the place I come from. I look like someone who might have had a childhood.

I start going to yoga class. It's a chain with a branch just up the road from my home, and from everyone's home. We lie tightly packed in the gym, in the smell of sweat and rubber. I do the same as everyone else, roll my mat out on the floor and lie down on it, cover myself with a nursery nap blanket.

It feels ridiculous at first, I look ridiculous. My body won't make the same shapes as the others. After a sudden stab in my belly, I dare not continue. I stick to simple things. Not the elegance of nature, of animals – the animals that have given their names to the postures. Not a warrior pose, none of the warrior poses. Maybe I can be said to resemble a pigeon when, bowed over my bent legs, I let the curve of my belly rest on my thighs.

The idea is that the poses free you from thinking. But that's not the way it works. The voices from outside – the instructor's voice – and the voices from within blend into each other.

*Process love. Into your body. Out of your body.*

*Feel the quality of the air in the room. The quality of love.*

*Listen to the sounds all around you. The dull thrum of anger from the street. This street. All streets.*

*Feel your own breathing. The quality of the breathing in this room. The quantity of anger.*

What I'm doing here is a kind of work, too. I'm working on myself. Towards my own liberation.

I dare not carry my mobile too close to my body. I turn off all my devices before going to bed. Think twice about buying new ones. It's growing within me, a feeling that everything around me is toxic. That it has occupied my body. When I eat, I taste the toxin of artificial sweetener, the toxin that results from frying. I have my windows open all the time, as the accumulated dust I don't have the energy to remove is toxic. Then I change my mind and keep the windows closed because the outside air, too, seems to be thick with evanescence.

When I'm sitting at the computer, I find myself thinking about the next session, whether we'll do the same poses. Whether we'll have just as long a relaxation stage next time: ten minutes in the corpse pose.

I listen to the others in the changing room, in the shower. I don't talk to them, but I nod in greeting after I've been a few times.

'Sure, call me an office flirt as much as you like. But I *was* in love once, you know.'

'Just because I put on a bit of a front with them doesn't mean I'm not doing it because I really want to.'

I often feel banal when I hear the others talking about themselves. As if they're showing me up too, as if that means I'm not really myself, just a manifestation of something – this city, this country, this time. A recipient.

‘Is there anyone here today who hasn’t tried this before?’

Then I’ll just briefly go over the points I think are most important.

First, there’s the breathing.

We breathe through our noses. And we move in time with our breathing.

Second – and this is the most important thing – each pose is different for each one of us. Listen to your own body.’

Our instructor’s name is Jonas. He’s very supple. Apart from that, there’s not much difference between him and us. The first time we had him I actually thought he was one of us. It wasn’t till he sat down on the instructor’s mat that I realised. There’s something anonymous about him, too. He’s the type who could be anything at all, the type people want to turn into a symbol of something.

In the changing room, someone says Jonas is just like her husband: you get irritated when he points out your mistakes, but you know he’s right all the same.

Sometimes Jonas walks around among us like an ordinary person. Bending over, he deftly straightens a back here, raises a rear there. He speaks softly, so you don’t have to worry the others will hear what mistakes you’ve made.

One day he comes over to me. He doesn’t place his hands on my body, as is his usual practice, just bends down to whisper.

‘While you’re here, think only of yourself. Let all your other thoughts drift away as if they’re being carried away on a cloud. You’re here for your own benefit, and that’s fine.’

Since then I’ve been making more of an effort than before. And I’ve got really good at it. Relaxing is a skill like

everything else. I do it extremely well. I do it so it really hurts. I suppose you could say it's a kind of vocation.

‘You deserve to let yourself feel good.’

Jonas is in charge, but only for as long as we’re on our mats. While I’m putting on my boots in the hallway, I see Jonas go out and talk to the staff on the cash desk. He gives a little smile in my direction while he’s chatting to one of the most dedicated ones; joking, she lays an arm on his shoulder. He seems not to take it amiss, but does the same back; he’s good at mirroring. He has no power here, and even less the time I see him selecting avocados in the corner shop nearest to the gym. Yet he doesn’t lose any of his attraction the further away he is from the yoga class. Is it something in Jonas, or something in his role as instructor?

When we're rolling up our mats and leaving the room, Jonas comes up to me. He has a frown line as deep as a gash in his forehead.

'I've noticed you never say Namaste. I think you'd have quite a different experience if you did.'

'But it seems odd to me – after all, I don't know the language or the culture.'

'You don't need to look at it that way. All we're doing is showing we appreciate the wonderful culture that yoga comes from.'

'It just seems weird to me.'

'Just say Namaste. It's not very nice if we've had a really good session and you don't say thank you.'

'I say thank you – afterwards, when we say thank you.'

'That's enough.'

'Namaste,' I say, and leave.

Our first quarrel.

Falling in love with your yoga teacher is common enough. That's what's happened to me. Reciprocation isn't as common. Instructors can't fall in love with all their students, it would be so time-consuming. But I'm the one student and Jonas the one instructor it happens to. After a class, when I ask him what to do if you can't bend far enough for the fish pose, he asks me if I'd like to meet him one day when there's no class. Go for a run, maybe? I suggest a stroll.

We were supposed to be strolling around town, but instead we end up on a bench where we start kissing. Neither of us seems to want to give up first, so we carry on for an hour or so. Afterwards, Jonas looks at me; the frown line's back, but more like a superficial cut now, a scar.

'Lots of people fall in love with their yoga teacher.'

'I know.'

'I want you to know I take this seriously. I hope you're serious too, not just messing around with your instructor.'

'Of course I'm serious.'

I haven't given it any thought up to now, about whether I want this to go somewhere or not. But the question forces me into a decision.

So we kiss again, for just as long. I don't know if the frown line is still there, dare not put my hands to his face to check.

Next time we meet away from the yoga class, we get drunk and Jonas comes home with me. We lie down on my bed. I tell him I have a wound: it's not that noticeable, but it makes me feel nervous. He says nothing, but holds my hand and then falls asleep. I look at him for a long time but finally fall asleep as well. When he wakes he says he never sleeps that well usually, and he gets up and makes porridge while I stay in bed.

We lie at an angle on the bed and never get round to straightening ourselves out. It's warm, there's an open window looking out over the courtyard, and I wonder whether people can tell we're the ones making the noise. His hands are deep in me and it isn't moaning that comes from my throat, but something lower-pitched; it becomes lower and lower until the pitch rises, and he's lying half over me. Sweat binds us together. There's a glitter about him, his eyes with their black pupils, the half-open mouth. Over me.

I go into the bathroom and catch sight of the wound, which isn't a wound, but a scar.

I go for regular check-ups. I get to see what's under my skin. Moving pictures in black and white, a pattern I can't interpret. In the waiting room, my mobile automatically links up to the hospital's wifi: the mobile's body memory, and mine.

I try to picture Jonas's face; it's hard to conjure up a face out of nothing. It's easier when I pick up my mobile, where it's the first photo you see.

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Praise from the press:

“With *Gränsen* Elise Karlsson proves that she is one of the most intriguing interpreters of our contemporary culture.”

*Göteborgs-Posten*

“With detached acuity and dark humour Elise Karlsson dissects post-industrial working life.”

*Svenska Dagbladet*

“This is a novel that takes place during the brief period in time when hearts are opened and closed. People are escaping across a sea and those who survive flock towards borders that have been shut

/... / Little by little, *Gränsen* expands into a panorama of the era, a chronicle from the age of powerlessness and escalating callousness. It is done so effortlessly, without formalities or excesses, and that is why it becomes so poignant.”

*Dagens Nyheter*

“Elise Karlsson proved already in her previous novel *Linjen* how phenomenal she is at describing office life with its hidden agendas and coffee machines / ... /

In *Gränsen* she places her characters in a larger context. Borders consist of lots of lines. Humans are pitted against one another when nations build walls. I just want more of Elise Karlsson. An author who doesn't use sentimentality as a drug to engage. But who still becomes incredibly insistent and urgent.”

*Arbetarbladet*

