

# On *The Givenness of Things*

Machteld Siegmann

Picture a bookstore in a small provincial city on a bleak Saturday morning. A bookseller of a certain age is sitting at the cash desk, his name is Theodore; more than half his face is covered with hair—if he had a wife, she would say something about it, something like, 'Let me trim that beard for you, honey,' her scissors poised for the attack, but he doesn't have a wife, he only has a cat. He's reading a book he ordered for a customer, its title is *The Givenness of Things*; he suspects the book has something to say to him, although he doesn't know what it is or if he will ever find out. That he's so enthralled in his reading might be called extraordinary when you consider that Theodore's love of books stems from a deep longing for knowledge, especially the kind that arranges everything in orderly categories and leaves no room for doubt or mystery.

The shop has only been open a few minutes, but it already has one customer, a retired police officer wearing a hat that he continuously lifts for some reason or other. Every Saturday morning, that man arrives to buy a newspaper and a spy novel. He usually brings a small dog with him, but he's left it at home today; Theodore's happy about that, not because he doesn't like dogs, but because today he's brought his cat with him, a shy creature that will only sit in the small office-kitchenette if the door is slightly open. The animal is frightened by many things, but not by the mess and the empty mugs that urgently need to be washed and the administration that's piling up because Theodore can't be bothered of late; he feels a growing need to let things simply run their course.

While Theodore continues reading, the doorbell pings again. A young girl, around eighteen, comes in; she has short bangs, and her hair is dyed black. Theodore nods hello, and she nods back. He senses something is going on with her, but he doesn't dwell on it, just shrugs, and goes back to reading *The Givenness of Things*.

Theodore doesn't know that the girl's mother threw her out of the house last night, a sordid business on which we won't waste any further time here. She roamed pretty much all night through the cold, wet streets before finally setting up camp opposite the bookstore. Dim lights were glowing in the store's display window, and something about that light caught her eye: it had a particular sort of warmth that she could feel penetrating her three layers of clothing. The window dressing was old-fashioned, displaying not only books but also what the books represented, namely the unlimited realm of fantasy. There was an odd creature with scales, an M.C. Escher print, and a map of an imaginary land folded open to reveal locations like Golden

City and Sweet River, places she would love to visit if it were possible. So, she decided not to walk any further but to stay there until daybreak and the bookstore opened. The thought of spending some time there was uplifting, the only uplifting thought she could cling to on a night that, thus far, had had little to offer.

The buildings across from the bookstore had deep porticoes, and in one, she found a piece of cardboard; she unfolded it, sat down, and waited patiently, fighting off sleep and the cold. She did not jump the gun by waiting at the door of the shop, and only got up to cross the street once the hands of her watch pointed to 9:35 on the dot. Now, the shop was lit entirely, not just the display window, and no one was in it except for an older gentleman wearing a hat who stood flipping through the pages of a book. She supposed there was a small office at the back where the staff was hanging out because its door was slightly ajar. And indeed, the door opened, and someone entered the shop, a man with a beard; we know by now his name is Theodore. The young woman stepped back as if she had a guilty conscience, although that wasn't the case, even if her mother thought differently.

In truth, the young woman didn't care for books; she didn't have the patience, there were too many things in her head that set off alarm bells and kept her from reading beyond the first few pages. Perhaps that's why she hesitated before entering; she paused briefly, looking through the window at the man with the beard who had sat down again with his book behind the checkout. It had an old-fashioned cash register, she saw, and that appealed to her, everything was suffused with the spirit of something permanent, and she desperately needed that this morning.

But then it occurred to her she might not be welcome. Maybe, when they saw her, they would see whatever her mother saw when she looked at her. And so, she did what she often did in such cases; she decided to wait for a sign. A sign that she could feel at ease about entering the shop. The sign was if the man lightly doffed his hat, as if in greeting. Luckily, she didn't have to wait long.

Now she is inside, the bell has rung, she's been noticed and greeted with no sideways glance, without a look that says, do you really think we're expecting the likes of you? It seems best to act as if she's a fan of all the genres on offer; it is comfortably warm in the store. She could spend three-quarters of an hour browsing, and by then, she would be thoroughly warmed and prepared to face the cold.

Jesus, I'm exhausted, she thinks. She feels the warmth taking hold of her, starting in her toes, and slowly creeping up towards her legs and belly; she takes a book, thumbs through it, puts it back and takes another, and goes through all the shelves categorically. At first, she reads a little of what's written, but gradually the warmth makes her so drowsy and inattentive that if

someone were to ask her what book she was holding in her hands, she wouldn't be able to say; it could be a cookbook or, just as easily, a poetry collection. She is startled by the voice of the man with the hat; he's asked the salesperson a question. She places the book she's holding back on the shelf and is about to take another when she realizes she's arrived at the pen display. There's a notepad on which to try them out; someone has scribbled, *Hello sexy!* So, she writes something beneath that, something she read somewhere that suddenly popped into her head: *Fear knocked at the door. Love answered and no one was there;* with that, the final remnants of her strength ebb away. She looks around, searching for a chair or stool to briefly sit down on, but there is none. The shop portion ends after the pen display, and then there is nothing but the door to the small office, which is slightly ajar; she spies a worn-out leather armchair with a cat sleeping on it. If the animal scooted over, she could sit down beside it.

She looks from the bearded man to the man in the hat. They both have their nose buried in a book, don't notice her.

She thinks, if the cat wakes up, that will be a sign, and this time too, she doesn't have to wait long; the cat stretches, nestles against the armrest, and gazes toward the door.

When Theodore looks up from his book, the young woman is nowhere to be seen, even though we didn't hear the bell ring, and neither did Theodore; his eyes dart around the shop, slightly panicked. He can see every customer from where he's sitting, except, of course, if someone happens to be lying on the floor. But then the retired police officer would indeed have raised the alarm instead of humming along quietly to the CD that Theodore had put on. Theodore steps from behind the cash register and looks left and right, but the girl isn't lying on the carpet, and the only thing he sees is a note with the words: *Hello sexy! Fear knocked at the door. Love answered and no one was there.*

Darn, thinks Theodore. His eyes move to his office, and he sees that the door is closed, although he is sure he left it open a crack.

'Is something wrong?' the retired police officer asks, 'You look worried.'

'I just have to nip into the back,' Theodore says, 'can you mind the store?'

'Of course,' the retired police officer replies and he continues reading.

Just to be sure, Theodore locks the cash register and slips the key into his trouser pocket. He takes his copy of *The Givenness of Things* in case he needs a weapon.

Translated from the Dutch by © Eileen J. Stevens

