Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Hunger

Written by Knut Hamsun

Published by Canongate Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

This edition published in 2011 by Canongate Books

This translation first published in Great Britain in 1996 by Canongate Books Ltd,
14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.canongate.tv

1

Translation, appendix and afterword copyright © Sverre Lyngstad, 1996
Introduction copyright © Jo Nesbø, 2011
Afterword copyright © Paul Auster, 1970

The moral rights of the authors and translator have been asserted

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 85786 179 5

Typeset in Goudy by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

PART ONE

It was in those days when I wandered about hungry in Kristiania, that strange city which no one leaves before it has set its mark upon him. . . .

Lying awake in my attic room, I hear a clock strike six downstairs. It was fairly light already and people were beginning to walk up and down the stairs. Over by the door, where my room was papered with old issues of *Morgenbladet*, I could see, very clearly, a notice from the Director of Lighthouses, and just left of it a fat, swelling ad for freshly baked bread by Fabian Olsen, Baker.

As soon as I opened my eyes I started wondering, by force of habit, whether I had anything to look forward to today. I had been somewhat hard up lately; my belongings had been taken to 'Uncle' one after the other, I had grown nervous and irritable, and a couple of times I had even stayed in bed for a day or so because of dizziness. Every now and then, when I was lucky, I managed to get five kroner for an article from some newspaper or other.

As it grew lighter and lighter I started reading the ads over by the door; I could even make out the thin, grinning letters concerning 'Shrouds at Madam Andersen's, main

entrance to the right'. This occupied me for quite a while – I heard the clock strike eight downstairs before I rose and got dressed.

I opened the window and looked out. From where I stood I had a view of a clothesline and an open field; in the distance was a forge, left over from a burned-down blacksmith's shop where some workers were busy cleaning up. I leaned forward with my elbows on the windowsill and gazed at the sky. It promised to be a clear day. Autumn had arrived, that lovely, cool time of year when everything changes colour and dies. The streets had already begun to get noisy, tempting me to go out. This empty room, where the floor rocked up and down at every step I took, was like a horrible, broken-down coffin. There was no proper lock on the door and no stove in the room; I used to sleep in my socks at night so they would dry a little before morning. The only thing I had to amuse myself with was a small red rocking chair where I used to sit in the evening, dozing and musing on all manner of things. When the wind blew hard and the doors downstairs were open, all sorts of eerie, whistling sounds floated up through the floor and out from the walls, and the *Morgenbladet* over by the door would get tears in it the length of my hand.

I stood up and searched through a bundle over in the corner by the bed for a bit of breakfast, but found nothing and went back again to the window.

God knows, I thought, if there is any point to my looking for work any more! All those refusals, those half promises and flat 'No's, hopes cherished only to be dashed, fresh attempts that always came to nothing – all this had killed my courage. Finally I had applied for a job as a bill collector but been too

late; besides I couldn't post a fifty-kroner bond. There was always something or other in the way. I also signed up for the fire brigade. There we stood, a half-hundred of us, in the entrance hall, throwing our chests out to give an impression of strength and fearlessness. A deputy chief went around inspecting these applicants, feeling their arm muscles and asking a question or two, and me he passed over, merely shaking his head and saying I was unfit because of my glasses. I showed up again, without glasses, standing there with knitted brows and making my eyes sharp as razors, but again the man passed over me, and he smiled – he must have recognised me. The worst of it was, my clothes were getting to be so shabby that I could no longer present myself for a position like a respectable person.

It had been going steadily downhill for me all along, and how! In the end, strange to say, I was stripped of everything under the sun, I didn't even have a comb any more or a book to read when life became too dreary. All summer long I had haunted the cemeteries and Palace Park, where I would sit and prepare articles for the newspapers, column after column about all sorts of things – strange whimsies, moods, caprices of my restless brain. In my desperation I had often chosen the most far-fetched subjects, which cost me hours and hours of effort and were never accepted. When a piece was finished I began a fresh one, and I wasn't very often discouraged by the editor's no; I kept telling myself that, some day, I was bound to succeed. And indeed, when I was lucky and it turned out well, I would occasionally get five kroner for an afternoon's work.

Getting up from the window again, I stepped over to the

wash-stand and sprinkled a bit of water on the shiny knees of my trousers, to darken them and make them look newer. This done, I put paper and pencil in my pocket, as usual, and went out. I stole quietly down the stairs to avoid attracting the attention of my landlady; my rent had been due a few days ago and I had nothing to pay her with any more.

It was nine o'clock. The air was filled with voices and the rumble of carriages, an immense morning chorus that mingled with the footsteps of the pedestrians and the cracks of the coachmen's whips. This noisy traffic everywhere put me in a brighter mood immediately, and I started feeling more and more contented. Nothing was further from my mind than just taking a morning walk in the fresh air. What did my lungs care about fresh air? I was strong as a giant and could stop a coach with my bare shoulders. A strange, delicate mood, a feeling of cheerful nonchalance, had taken possession of me. I began to observe the people I met or passed, read the posters on the walls, caught a glance cast my way from a passing streetcar, and laid myself open to every trivial occurrence – all the little fortuitous things that crossed my path and disappeared.

If only one had a bite to eat on such a clear day! Overwhelmed by the impression of the happy morning, I experienced an irrepressible sense of well-being and started humming for joy for no particular reason. A woman with a basket on her arm stood outside a butcher shop pondering sausages for dinner; she glanced at me as I walked past. She had only a single tooth in the front of her mouth. Nervous and susceptible as I had become during the last few days, the woman's

face made a repellent impression on me right off; that long yellow tooth looked like a little finger sticking up from her jaw, and her eyes were still full of sausage as she turned toward me. I lost my appetite instantly and felt nauseated. When I reached the Arcades I went over to the fountain and drank some water. I looked up – the clock in the tower of Our Saviour's showed ten.

Continuing through the streets, I roamed about without a care in the world, stopped at a corner without having to, turned and went down a side street without an errand there. I went with the flow, borne from place to place this happy morning, rocking serenely to and fro among other happy people. The sky was clear and bright, and my mind was without a shadow.

For ten minutes now I had constantly had a limping old man ahead of me. In one hand he carried a bundle, and he walked with his whole body, using all his strength to press ahead. I could hear how he panted from the effort, and it occurred to me that I could carry his bundle; still, I didn't try to catch up with him. On Grænsen Street I ran into Hans Pauli, who greeted me and hurried past. Why was he in such a hurry? I certainly didn't mean to ask him for a handout, and I would also presently return a blanket I had borrowed from him a few weeks ago. Once I had pulled through, I certainly didn't want to owe anybody a blanket; I might start an article this very day about the crimes of the future or the freedom of the will, anything whatever, something worth reading, something I would get at least ten kroner for. . . . And at the thought of this article I instantly felt an onrush of desire to begin right away, tapping my chock-full brain. I would find

myself a suitable place in Palace Park and not rest till it was finished.

But the old cripple was still making the same wriggling movements up the street ahead of me. In the end I was getting increasingly irritated by having this decrepit creature in front of me all the time. His journey would never end, it seemed; maybe he was going to the exact same place as I, and I would have him before my eyes all the way. Agitated as I was, he appeared to me to slow down a little at each side street and somehow waited to see what direction I would take, whereupon he swung his bundle high in the air once more and walked on with all his might to gain distance on me. I go on watching this bustling fellow and feel my resentment toward him swelling within me. I felt he was slowly ruining my cheery mood and dragging this pure, lovely morning down with him, into ugliness, as well. He looked like a large hobbling insect bent on grabbing a place in the world through brute force and keeping the sidewalk all for itself. When we had reached the top of the hill I refused to put up with it any longer and, turning toward a shop window, stopped to give him an opportunity to slip away. But when I started off again after a few minutes, the man popped up in front of me once more: he too had stood stock-still. Without thinking, I took three or four furious strides forward, caught up with him and tapped him on the shoulder.

He stopped short. We both stared at each other.

'A bit of change for milk!' he finally said, cocking his head.

Well, now I was really in for it! I fumbled in my pockets and said, 'For milk, right. Hmm. Money is scarce these days, and I don't know how badly you may need it.'

'I haven't eaten since yesterday, in Drammen,' the man said. 'I don't have a penny and I'm still out of work.'

'Are you an artisan?'

'Yes, I am a welter.'

'A what?'

'A welter. For that matter, I can make shoes, too.'

'That alters the case,' I said. 'Just wait a few minutes and I'll go and get some money for you, a few øre anyway.'

I hastened down Pilestrædet Lane, where I knew of a pawnbroker on the second floor, someone I had never been to before. When I got inside the gate I quickly took off my waistcoat, rolled it up and stuck it under my arm; then I walked up the stairs and knocked on the door to the shop. I made a bow and threw the waistcoat on the counter.

'One krone and a half,' the man said.

'All right,' I said. 'If it weren't for the fact that it's getting a bit tight for me, I wouldn't have parted with it.'

I got the money and the slip and retraced my steps. All things considered, this business with the waistcoat was an excellent idea; there would even be money to spare for an ample breakfast, and by evening my monograph about the crimes of the future would be ready. Life began to look sunnier right away, and I hastened back to the man to get rid of him.

'Here you are,' I said to him. 'I'm glad you came to me first.'

He took the money and began to look me up and down. What did he stand there staring at? I had the impression that he examined especially the knees of my trousers, and I found this piece of impudence tiresome. Did that louse imagine I

was really as poor as I looked? Hadn't I just about started writing a ten-krone article? On the whole, I had no apprehensions about the future, I had many irons in the fire. So, what business was it of this total stranger if I handed out a gratuity on such a bright morning? The man's stare annoyed me, and I decided to give him a piece of my mind before leaving him. Shrugging my shoulders, I said, 'My dear man, you have fallen into a nasty habit of staring at a man's knees when he gives you a krone's worth of money.'

He leaned his head back against the wall, all the way, and opened his mouth wide. Something was stirring behind that tramp's forehead of his; thinking, no doubt, that I meant to trick him in some way, he handed the money back to me.

I stamped my feet, swearing he should keep it. Did he imagine I had gone to all that trouble for nothing? When all was said and done, maybe I owed him this krone – I had a knack for remembering old debts, he was in the presence of a person of integrity, honest to his very fingertips. In short, the money was his. . . . No need for thanks, it had been a pleasure. Goodbye.

I left. I was rid at last of this paralytic nuisance and could feel at ease. I went down Pilestrædet Lane again and stopped outside a grocer's. The window was packed with food, and I decided to go in and get myself something for the road.

'A piece of cheese and a white loaf!' I said, smacking my half krone down on the counter.

'Cheese and bread for all of it?' the woman asked ironically, without looking at me.

'For all of fifty øre, yes,' I replied, unruffled.

I got my things, said goodbye to the fat old woman with

the utmost politeness, and started up Palace Hill to the park without delay. I found a bench for myself and began gnawing greedily at my snack. It did me a lot of good; it had been a long time since I'd had such an ample meal, and I gradually felt that same sense of satiated repose you experience after a good cry. My courage rose markedly; I was no longer satisfied with writing an article about something so elementary and straightforward as the crimes of the future, which anybody could guess, or simply learn by reading history. I felt capable of a greater effort and, being in the mood to surmount difficulties, decided upon a three-part monograph about philosophical cognition. Needless to say, I would have an opportunity to deal a deathblow to Kant's sophisms. . . . When I wanted to get out my writing materials to begin work, I discovered I didn't have a pencil on me any more – I had left it in the pawnshop, my pencil was in the vest pocket.

God, how everything I touched seemed bent on going wrong! I reeled off a few curses, got up from the bench and strolled along the paths, back and forth. It was very quiet everywhere; way over at the Queen's Pavilion a couple of nursemaids were wheeling their baby carriages about, otherwise not a single person could be seen anywhere. I felt extremely angry and paced like a madman up and down in front of my bench. Strange how badly things were going for me wherever I turned! A three-part article would come to nothing simply because I didn't have a ten-øre pencil in my pocket! What if I went down to Pilestrædet Lane again and got my pencil back! There would still be time to complete a sizable portion before the park began to be overrun by pedestrians. So much

depended on this monograph about philosophical cognition, maybe several people's happiness, you never knew. I told myself that it might turn out to be a great help to many young people. On second thoughts, I would not attack Kant; it could be avoided, after all – I just had to make an imperceptible detour when I came to the problem of time and space; but I wouldn't answer for Renan, that old parson. . . . At all events, what had to be done was to write an article filling so and so many columns; the unpaid rent and my landlady's long looks when I met her on the stairs in the morning tormented me all day and popped up even in my happy moments, when there wasn't another dark thought in my head. This had to be stopped. I walked rapidly out of the park to pick up my pencil at the pawnbroker's.

When I got as far as Palace Hill I overtook and passed two ladies. As I walked by I brushed the sleeve of one of them; I looked up – she had a full, somewhat pale face. Suddenly she blushes and becomes wonderfully beautiful, I don't know why, maybe from a word she'd heard spoken by a passer-by, maybe only because of some silent thought of her own. Or could it be because I had touched her arm? Her high bosom heaves visibly several times, and she presses her hand firmly around the handle of her parasol. What was the matter with her?

I stopped and let her get ahead of me again – I couldn't continue just then, it all seemed so strange. I was in an irritable mood, annoyed with myself because of the mishap with the pencil and highly stimulated by all the food I had put away on an empty stomach. All at once my thoughts, by a fanciful whim, take an odd direction – I'm seized by a strange

desire to frighten this lady, to follow her and hurt her in some way. I overtake her once more and walk past her, then abruptly turn around and meet her face to face to observe her. I stand there looking her straight in the eye, and immediately a name comes to me, one I had never heard before, a name with a nervous, gliding sound: Ylajali. Once she is close enough to me, I straighten up and say urgently, 'Miss, you're losing your book.'

I could hear the sound of my heartbeat as I said it.

'My book?' she asks her companion. And she walks on.

My malice increased and I followed the lady. I was at that moment fully conscious of playing a mad prank, without being able to do anything about it; my confused state was running away with me, giving me the most insane ideas, which I obeyed one after the other. No matter how much I kept telling myself that I was behaving like an idiot, it was no use; I made the stupidest faces behind the lady's back and coughed furiously several times as I walked past her. Strolling on thus at a slow pace, always with a few steps' lead, I could feel her eyes on my back and instinctively ducked with shame at having pestered her. Gradually I began to have an odd sensation of being far away, in some other place; I vaguely felt that it wasn't I who was walking there on the flagstones with bowed head.

A few minutes later the lady has reached Pascha's Bookshop. I'm already standing at the first window, and as she walks by I step out and say again, 'Miss, you're losing your book.'

'What book?' she asks, scared. 'Can you understand what book he's talking about?'

She stops. I gloat cruelly over her confusion, the bewilderment in her eyes gives me a thrill. Her thoughts cannot fathom my little desperate remark; she has no book at all with her, not a single page of a book, and yet she searches her pockets, looks repeatedly at her hands, turns her head to examine the street behind her, and racks her sensitive little brain to the utmost to find out what sort of book I am talking about. Her colour comes and goes, her face changes from one expression to another, and her breath is audible; even the buttons on her dress seem to stare at me, like a row of terrified eyes.

'Don't mind him,' her companion says, pulling her by the arm; 'he's drunk. Can't you see the man is drunk!'

However estranged I was from myself at this moment, so completely at the mercy of invisible influences, nothing that was taking place around me escaped my perception. A big brown dog ran across the street, toward the Students' Promenade and down to the amusement park; it had a narrow collar of German silver. Farther up the street a window was opened on the second floor and a maid with her sleeves turned up leaned out and began to clean the panes on the outside. Nothing escaped my attention, I was lucid and self-possessed, and everything rushed in upon me with a brilliant distinctness, as if an intense light had suddenly sprung up around me. The ladies before me had each a blue-bird's wing in their hats and a plaid silk band around their necks. It occurred to me that they were sisters.

Turning aside, they stopped at Cisler's Music Shop and talked. I stopped also. Then they both started back, going the same way they had come, passed me once again, turned the

corner at University Street and went straight up to St Olaf Place. All the while I followed as hard upon their heels as I dared. They turned around once, giving me a half-scared, half-curious glance; I didn't perceive any resentment in their looks nor any knitted brows. This patience with my harassment made me feel very ashamed, and I lowered my eyes. I didn't want to pester them any more – I would follow them with my eyes out of sheer gratitude, not lose sight of them until they entered somewhere and disappeared.

In front of number 2, a big four-storey building, they turned once more and then went in. I leaned against a lamppost near the fountain and listened for their footsteps on the stairs; they died away on the second floor. I step out from under the lamp and look up at the building. Then something odd happens – high up some curtains stir, a moment later a window is opened, a head pops out, and two strange-looking eyes are fixed on me. 'Ylajali,' I said under my breath, feeling myself turning red. Why didn't she call for help? Why didn't she push one of those flowerpots over on my head or send someone down to chase me away? We stand looking each other straight in the face without moving; a minute goes by; thoughts dart back and forth between the window and the street, but not a word is spoken. She turns around – I feel a jolt, a light shock, go through me; I see a shoulder turning, a back disappearing into the room. This unhurried stepping away from the window, the inflection of that movement of her shoulder, was like a nod to me; my blood perceived this subtle greeting and I felt wonderfully happy all at once. Then I turned around and walked down the street.

Not daring to look back, I didn't know if she had come to

the window again; as I pondered this question I grew more and more uneasy and nervous. In all likelihood she was at this moment closely following every movement of mine, and it was absolutely unbearable to know that you were being scrutinised like that from behind. I pulled myself together as best I could and walked on; my legs began twitching and my walk became unsteady just because I purposely tried to make it graceful. In order to seem calm and indifferent I waved my arms absurdly, spat at the ground and stuck my nose in the air, but it was no use. I constantly felt those pursuing eyes on my neck and a chill went through my body. At last I took refuge in a side street, from which I set off for Pilestrædet Lane to get hold of my pencil.

I didn't have any trouble retrieving it. The man brought me the waistcoat himself and invited me to go through all the pockets while I was at it. I did find a couple of pawn tickets, which I pocketed, and thanked the friendly man for his courtesy. I liked him more and more, and it became very important to me at that moment to make a good impression on him. I started walking toward the door but turned back to the counter again as if I had forgotten something; I felt I owed him an explanation, a bit of information, and began humming to catch his attention. Then I took the pencil into my hand and held it up.

It would never occur to me, I said, to come such a long way for just any pencil; but with this one it was a different matter, there was a special reason. However insignificant it might look, this stump of a pencil had simply made me what I was in this world, had put me in my right place in life, so to speak. . . .

I didn't say any more. The man came right up to the counter.

'Is that so?' he said, looking curiously at me.

With this pencil, I continued coolly, I had written my monograph about philosophical cognition in three volumes. Hadn't he heard of it?

And the man thought that, sure enough, he had heard the name, the title.

Well, I said, that one was by me, yes indeed! So he shouldn't be at all surprised that I wanted to get this tiny stub of a pencil back; it was far too precious to me, it seemed almost like a little person. Anyway, I was sincerely grateful to him for his kindness and would remember him for it – oh yes, I would really remember him for it; a word was a word, that was the kind of person I was, and he deserved it. Goodbye.

I probably walked to the door with the bearing of someone having the power to make a high appointment. The respectable pawnbroker bowed twice to me as I withdrew, and I turned once more to say goodbye.

On the stairs I met a woman carrying a travelling bag in her hand. She timidly pressed closer to the wall to make room for me since I was giving myself such airs, and I instinctively put my hand in my pocket for something to give her. When I didn't find anything I felt embarrassed and ducked my head as I passed her. Shortly afterward I heard her, too, knocking at the door of the shop – the door had a steel-wire grille on it, and I immediately recognised the jingling sound it made when touched by human knuckles.

The sun was in the south, it was about twelve. The city was beginning to get on its feet; with strolling time approaching, bowing and laughing people were surging up and down Karl

Johan Street. I pressed my elbows against my sides to make myself small and slipped unnoticed past some acquaintances who had stationed themselves at a corner by the University to watch the passers-by. I wandered up Palace Hill and became lost in thought.

These people that I met – how lightly and merrily they bobbed their bright faces, dancing their way through life as though it were a ballroom! There was no sign of grief in a single eye that I saw, no burden on any shoulder, not even a cloudy thought maybe, or a little secret suffering, in any of those happy hearts. While I, who walked there right beside these people, young and freshly blown, had already forgotten the very look of happiness! Coddling myself with this thought, I found that a terrible injustice had been done to me. Why had these last few months been so exceedingly rough on me? I couldn't recognise my cheerful disposition anymore, and I had the weirdest troubles wherever I turned. I couldn't sit down on a bench by myself or set foot anywhere without being attacked by small, trivial incidents, miserable trifles that forced their way among my ideas and scattered my powers to the four winds. A dog streaking past, a yellow rose in a gentleman's buttonhole, could start my thoughts vibrating and occupy me for a long time. What was the matter with me? Had the Lord's finger pointed at me? But why exactly me? Why not just as well at some person in South America, for that matter? When I pondered this, it became more and more incomprehensible to me why precisely I should have been chosen as a guinea pig for a caprice of divine grace. To skip a whole world in order to get to me – that was a rather odd way of doing things; there was, after all, both Pascha the

second-hand book dealer and Hennechen, the steamship agent.

I wandered about debating this matter, unable to get it out of my mind; I discovered the weightiest objections to the Lord's arbitrariness in letting me suffer for everybody else's sake. Even after I had found a bench and sat down, this question continued to occupy me, hindering me from thinking about anything else. From that day in May when my adversities had begun I could clearly perceive a gradually increasing weakness, I seemed to have become too feeble to steer or guide myself where I wanted to go; a swarm of tiny vermin had forced its way inside me and hollowed me out. What if God simply intended to annihilate me? I stood up and paced back and forth in front of my bench.

My whole being was at this moment filled with the utmost anguish; even my arms ached, and I could barely endure carrying them in the usual way. I also felt a marked discomfort from my recent big meal. Glutted and irritated, I walked to and fro without looking up; the people who came and went around me glided by like flickering shadows. Finally my bench was taken by a couple of gentlemen who lighted their cigars and chatted loudly; I became angry and meant to speak to them, but turned around and went all the way to the other end of the park, where I found another bench for myself. I sat down.

The thought of God began to occupy me again. It seemed to me quite inexcusable for him to meddle every time I applied for a job and thus upset everything, since all I was asking for was my daily bread. I had noticed distinctly that every time I went hungry for quite a long time it was as though my brain

trickled quietly out of my head, leaving me empty. My head grew light and absent, I could no longer feel its weight on my shoulders, and I had the impression that my eyes showed a too-wide stare when I looked at somebody.

As I sat there on the bench pondering all this, I felt increasingly bitter toward God for his continual oppressions. If he meant to draw me closer to himself and make me better by torturing me and casting adversity my way, he was simply mistaken, that I could vouch for. And nearly crying with defiance, I looked up toward heaven and told him so once and for all, inwardly.

Fragments of my childhood teachings came back to me, the cadences of the Bible rang in my ears, and I spoke softly to myself, cocking my head sarcastically. Wherefore did I take thought what I should eat, what I should drink, and wherewithal I should clothe this wretched bag of worms called my earthly body? Had not my heavenly Father provided for me as he had for the sparrows of the air, and had he not shown me the grace of pointing at his humble servant? God had stuck his finger down into the network of my nerves and gently, quite casually, brought a little confusion among the threads. And God had withdrawn his finger and behold! – there were fibres and delicate filaments on his finger from the threads of my nerves. And there was a gaping hole after his finger, which was God's finger, and wounds in my brain from the track of his finger. But where God had touched me with the finger of his hand he let me be and touched me no more, and allowed no evil to befall me. He let me go in peace, and he let me go with that gaping hole. And no evil shall befall me from God, who is the Lord through all eternity. . . .