

# Where We Came From

**Carmien Michels**

**An extract pp (7-8; 24-25; 53-54; 9; 10; 16)**

**Original title** We komen van ver  
**Publisher** Polis, 2017

**Translation** Dutch into English  
**Translator** Michele Hutchison

© Carmien Michels/Michele Hutchison/Polis/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

**p 7-8**

**Carmien (\*kɑ:mɑin) n. song or poem that comes about by accident**

A nipple in my ear  
just after the big bang  
I heard my mother whisper  
soothingly  
that I was a sweet poem

young creatures  
fit any mould  
at drama school I learned to play Ping-Pong  
with Dora's Ps

Pain  
Pleasure  
Personality  
Perversion  
Poetry

Picked what I expected they expected  
the metier of self-pity

Always thought I was a misprint  
better to have stayed in the womb  
until I stopped laughing and started missing myself

Broken dikes, on the verge of bursting  
I crept back into my birth book again  
by now a competent reader of lips  
thanks to years of collisions with unnamed mistresses  
their nipples in my ear

There I re-read my mother's fateful whisper  
poetry abandoned  
soothingly  
saying I was a sweetie pie

---

p 24-25

## Bed

The bed in which we don't fit  
forces us to lie down  
so that we meet the frame

Arm flattened beneath torso  
neck pressed against headboard  
toes folded in lotus position

Where buttock spills from bed  
or shoulder blade reaches the edge  
the bed calls pitilessly  
for the precision saw

Excess skin fat bones  
flop on top of intercepted thoughts  
and trimmed labia

Don't think that when  
we leave the bed we can just  
put them on again  
like clothes  
forgotten in the pub

What once fitted like a glove  
suppurates in our conscience  
there where we betrayed  
the bed in its most intimate springs

Phantom pain in places  
where we chose limbs  
over membership  
peeing is no longer the same

Polish our bodies  
scrub our insides  
cut deserters out of our lexicon

We want to be the mattress  
the hardcore base of this civilised bed  
which we worship above all else

---

## British Grannies

The British lady  
who went ballroom dancing on Sundays  
coming that way by her weekly shag  
in the Royal Festival Hall

Swishing her artificial hip  
old goats are horniest around noon

Eyes twinkling pinching young waiters  
in their parts of the world  
cheek bulging with her tongue  
stuffing tips in their perplexed palms  
promises of pink back rooms

I had to swear to my friend I'd never  
write about the ball-pincher  
nor about her libertine girlish grin  
cycling for the first time without help  
honk honk in those lads' tooters  
it was her gran

I swore that otherwise acid would dissolve me  
dripping from the corners of my mouth down my chin  
taking away my tongue and  
my chance to sign contracts worth millions  
for poems like these  
without saliva stains

Many years passed  
my friend's address drowned  
in a yellow sea of costly censorship  
I'm selling my unsent letters  
as readymade wash-mitts  
grabbing granny sent a postcard  
greetings from Compostela

---

## My mother my daughter

That dream in which I was pregnant  
with my own mum  
didn't dare call her about it

Or when my dad said  
I want to be a girl

Finally I said  
rubbing my belly  
to check  
whether my mum had heard

She kicked harder than ever  
until my dad  
crimped and his smile  
cramped

---

p 10

## Family Weekend

My dad tied to a totem pole  
we play football and aim at his glasses  
he whimpers in a trance about the boa in the bath  
when he was a boy in the Congo

My cousin scores an own goal  
falls down with hands on crotch  
a missionary standing where the pole's shadow  
reaches the apple tree nods at my dad

Men and boys sweat girls don't  
the sun dribbles between the clouds  
there's no snake slithering through the grass

---

## City of Multiplication

There's a bedside table beside the lamppost on the square  
next to it a mattress with a damp patch  
the imprint of a child  
daylight dries the wet dreams of  
whoever left their bedroom here

A woman waters her geraniums on a balcony  
a tramp with a bar of soap hums beneath the drops  
in a future life he's Piaf

A group of old people wave at statues as though they're alive  
the busker at the fountain blares out:  
in every stone I see my wife  
fifty years ago when her legs were still  
smooth and lithe

The tramp hums on undisturbed  
the elderly have disappeared from the song  
the geranium lady pokes a finger into the soil  
still two pots to go

---