FLANDERS LITERATURE

# This is My Farm

**Chris de Stoop**

**An extract**

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## Prologue

There we are then, my brother and I, late in the afternoon, deep in the mud, blue with cold, calling to the cows, 'Come, come, come,' when behind us bullets suddenly ricochet off the cattle shed. Instinctively we duck down and look around. Soaked fields and meadows stretch away before us to the horizon, bordered by overfull dikes. The only unusual thing we can see is a bulldozer on the other side of the meadow behind the fence.

The older cows obediently allow us to herd them together. They still answer to nicknames such as Stampfoot, Sharphorn, or Whitenose and have already spent a winter in the warm shed. They splash sluggishly through the yard gate, past the long, fresh maize silage pit, its bittersweet scent hanging like steam in the air. They waddle blindly towards the shed, wiggling their fat bottoms, murmuring with pleasure, heading straight for the manger to eat hay.

The seven young heifers, however, the orange chips in their ears still shiny, will not be driven, even by the stick, towards the gate through which they first entered the meadow in September, along with the bull. We chase them, waving our arms, yelling and shouting, slipping over and ending up wet through. Every time they turn at the last moment and storm past us, missing us by millimetres. Lowing loudly they flee in all directions. Since our childhood it's been established that I'm the quickest and my brother is the strongest, so it's always down to me to chase after them.

The wind picks up, I make a leap for the clumps of grass on the edge of a puddle, briefly lose my balance and fall headlong into the mud. Exhausted, I lie there for half a minute watching the large planes of grey shifting across one another above me. How many times have we done this together? I always loved driving the cattle in and out of the shed with my brother. Every couple of years I receive a hind quarter to take home in exchange. Not from the best cow, which is too valuable, but from the worst. I bought a deepfreeze for it and sometimes eat cow for months, until it's coming out of my ears. Which happens all the faster if I knew the cow in question well.

In the end we succeed in opening the fencing completely in another place and driving the heifers into the yard a different way – a tried and tested distraction tactic. My brother walks ahead of the animals with a fork of hay to lure them into the shed. Once the last one is inside we hastily bolt the

door. Dead tired, we lean against the wall, the lower section of which is black with manure. We're glistening with sweat and dirt.

Although I stopped smoking twenty years ago, I now roll a cigarette, along with my brother. A thin one, as he's mean with his tobacco and keeps a close eye on me. We smoke and spit without saying a word.

All the cattle are now inside and only the bulldozer remains behind outside in the rain, which is gradually turning into wet snow. Inside it's cosy between the steaming cows' bodies. But we don't talk with satisfaction about the whole operation as we used to, we don't keep on endlessly dragging up how perilous it was and how wild they were and how lucky we were that we managed to get the animals back in the shed, no.

'Farming's pretty much finished,' my brother says for the umpteenth time, a mixture of fear and resentment on his face. 'They want to get rid of us.'

'Not for a good long time,' I say.

We're silent again, looking around the shed, in which the decay is slowly becoming perceptible in the bent pipes and rusty drinking troughs. The cows are already lying down close together, their heavy heads on one another's stomachs. They look back at us with shining eyes, their breath visible as clouds of steam. The young heifers are still very restless. Sometimes the mange becomes intolerable and they rub up against the walls. Sometimes they arch their backs and stick their tails in the air, pissing and shitting. The spatter reaches our faces.

'Good honest animals,' I say, tense, trying to placate him. 'A nice healthy, closed-loop suckler cow business, what more could a farmer want?'

'They've got the runs,' he says. 'And the farm isn't operating anymore.'

The company needs a new environmental permit and he's afraid the old open manure heap is going to be a problem, that they'll say the liquid is leaking into the ground, that the muckheap is uncovered, that the neighbours are bothered by the stench. And what about the ammonia emissions and nitrogen deposition?

I go outside for a piss. Nothing like pissing against a tree or bush, dick in the wind, one with nature, free as a bird. 'You'll kill the flowers, you little brats,' ma used to shout. But spotty-faced brats that we were, we did it all over again the next time, to mark our territory. I was four or five years old when my brother, with a grin on his face, invited me to piss on a stretch of barbed wire. A classic, silly farm kids' game, that's what I thought. An electric pulse ripped through my willy, as if I were struck by lightning.

Now my brother sits on the low wall by the old pigsty, his favourite perch, from which you can always see the cows, both in the open shed and in the meadow behind the orchard. From there he can follow whether they're in heat, whether they're in calf or ready to calve. I go to sit next to him on the wall. Together we watch the animals. Sitting there, I'm overwhelmed by the nostalgia which sometimes clings to me. A feeling about more than just family, about the farm and fields and streams, about a life connected with land and air, about what is old and familiar and has always been there.

I think of how lovely it is to live with such big, good-natured animals as the ones that have lived here as long as anyone can remember, and I wonder whether the day will come when everyone becomes vegetarian, or when meat is cultivated in laboratories, or when the last farmer has died out, and we can no longer imagine ever having had cows weighing a thousand kilos as pets. I wonder whether that would be a pity.

Behind us the hoarse cry of a pheasant rings out from the bushes. A flock of birds flies over. Are they lapwings? No, pigeons.

Then several loud shots ring out again one after another. I jump up and hear a blast of small bullets on the corrugated iron. A sharp drumming sound, as if a bucket of marbles were poured out over the roof. To the left and right I see pigeons that have been hit fall from the sky, some still squeaking, others in tatters, arrested in flight by a broad beam of hail.

It's the hunter, of course, the weirdo. He comes to shoot woodpigeons from behind the clump of alders. If he doesn't do something about them, he might be held personally liable for the damage they cause. Ma has called him a couple of times in the past because the pigeons in the roof truss over the cattle shed were making nests and breeding like rats. They cover everything in shit, cows included. The brown gates and grids are white with pigeon crap.

'It's a disgrace,' I grumble. 'A bloodbath.'

My brother strides into the house where he has lived all his life, apart from one year of military service, but which now suddenly looks and feels different. It's a mess here. Junk on the table, mouldy plates in the sink, spiders' webs over the windows. Because ma, who has always taken care of him, now lies wired up to a hospital bed among buzzing, throbbing machines. Ma was always there for him to talk to, about the weather, the cattle, the harvest, all the other farm matters. Fact is, now he's alone for the first time in his life. And being alone isn't his thing, still less ma's. It is my thing though, I'm good at being alone. But he doesn't complain, he has enough tobacco, and the deep freeze is full.

The rain and wind lash at the old farmhouse, the guttering rattles, the dripping spruces at the window thrash and creak. My brother taps with his knuckles on the barometer, as pa used to. The needle jumps to 'bad weather'. The radio forecast for the next few days also predicts lots of snow and hard frost. The cows' drinking troughs might freeze and he'll have to give all the animals drinking water by bucket for days on end. It's going to be a foul winter.

'You just don't get normal seasons anymore,' he says.

'The weatherman sometimes gets it wrong,' I conciliate.

We sit on either side of the stove like we always did. My brother half slumped back on his black leather sofa, one hand under his chin, smoke around his head. I feel sorry for him.

'Ma's had it,' he says. 'She'll never come good. She's never coming back.'

'We don't know that.'

He puts out his stub and immediately rolls a new cigarette. Then he says something that's really indisputable: 'This is a family business.'

I dispute it all the same: ‘Come on, this is your homestead. Has been for years.’

‘This is our homestead,’ he says emphatically, as if he has practised beforehand.

‘Yes,’ I admit, and I stand up. ‘It’s true. It’s a family business.’

‘Well then,’ he asks with his eyes closed, ‘when are you leaving?’

‘Day after tomorrow,’ I say cautiously. ‘To Haiti. For the earthquake. See how the small farmers there are holding out.’

He never could stand it, the talk of travel. As if it were a form of desertion. Wasn’t it interesting enough here?

But not a word of protest now. He nods, without comment. We almost never speak about my world, always about his. Ours.

So I leave him behind with his stubbly, week-old beard, his nicotine-yellowed fingers and his forehead covered in horizontal lines  like a musical stave. As I step into the car a few geese come cackling over the yard. ‘There are the migratory geese,’ ma used to say. ‘Hold tight and don’t slip, you’ll catch your death of cold out there.’