

Greener Grass

Annelies Verbeke

An extract

Original title Groener gras
Publisher De Geus, 2007

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Michiel Horn–Liz Waters

© Annelies Verbeke/Michiel Horn–Liz Waters/De Geus/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.

Translation Michiel Horn

Lola

Lola cycled often, and her trips lasted ever longer. According to her family she was driven to this by marital problems and unemployment. She herself did not look that far for reasons. She cycled for the joy of it. She had very muscled legs.

Quite naturally, along the way she sometimes thought of less agreeable things. Thus it regularly occurred to her that everything she longed for seemed never to arrive. The only solution she could think of was to long for less. Probably it was wise to limit herself to just one desire.

She tried to choose between a good marriage and an interesting job, but in fact considered both too unimportant to commit herself fully to either. Her husband would leave her in any case, and if she were working she would not be able to ride her bicycle during the best part of the day. She did not like the arts and did not participate in competitive sports. Nor did money and celebrity interest her. Perhaps this was why, for the first time in her life, she began to crave a soul mate.

Often she stopped at a large meadow, a little outside the city. She liked looking at the grazing cattle, even though she didn't want to dwell too long on the details of their cud chewing. On a nippy spring afternoon she met a man at the barbed wire. His name was Bert and he was about ten years older than she.

'You kind of seem to like cows,' he said.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked straight ahead. He was standing rather close, she thought. She used her nail to remove some moss from a wooden stake that kept the electrically charged fence wires in place.

'Do you know the Heck brothers?' Bert asked.

Lola shook her head. She did not know all that many people.

'They've bred the Heck cattle. To this day it's the best attempt to copy the aurochs. It died out in the Middle Ages.'

He seemed to want to impress her. She noticed that these opening sentences sounded more or less rehearsed. Perhaps he had seen her standing at the meadow before.

‘They can roam around outside all year long and need little care.’

Lola sensed that he was searching her face.

‘I’m a farmer,’ said Bert. ‘These animals are mine. The land too.’

Lola nodded briefly. For a while the only sound was a bird’s panicky cry.

‘Heck cattle also produce less methane gas,’ said Bert. ‘That’s better for the environment.’

‘What’s that one called?’ asked Lola. She pointed at a young bull who was angrily shaking flies from his head. He was her favourite.

Bert was silent for a moment.

‘That one doesn’t really have a name. You can think one up if you want.’

‘Lola,’ said Lola.

‘But he’s a bull.’

Lola shrugged her shoulders and continued staring at the bull. Bert laughed nervously.

‘All right then,’ he said. ‘That bull’s name is Lola. And who are you?’

‘Lola,’ said Lola.

Bert found that easy to remember.

Lola had the sense that Lola understood her. He looked that way. She visited him as often as possible. If Bert was not around, she stayed longer and sometimes talked about herself and about Luc, her husband, who had been her colleague and had asked her to marry him. She had nodded and then quietly waited to see what would happen. After three years he wanted a divorce. He said he couldn’t stand her silence any longer. When he asked her whether she agreed to the divorce, she shook her head. She didn’t know what to add to that.

The compassionate look behind the long eyelashes of her artiodactylic namesake moved her deeply. He shook his head. She understood that she did not need to clarify anything. That he knew everything about divorces and everything about her. It was enough to look into his big, round eyes. After every visit she felt better. It was as if someone had finally turned on the heat.

Her mother and Luc, who always agreed completely about everything concerning Lola, interpreted the calmness that had descended in her as an increase in her absentmindedness. When they buckled down to their cream of asparagus soup, as they did every Wednesday evening in the parental home, they observed Lola closely for a few minutes. Thereupon they exchanged a meaningful glance.

‘Does she still cycle as much?’ Lola’s mother wanted to know.

‘All the time,’ Luc replied. ‘I see her for an hour a day at most.’

‘And do you still intend to get a divorce?’

‘Yes,’ Luc sighed. ‘But she doesn’t want that either.’

‘You know you’ll always be welcome here.’

‘That’s as it should be. Nobody does that soup the way you do.’

The mother laughed shrilly. Their eyes passed over Lola, and they smiled at each other.

Lola never took part in their repetitive conversations. She didn’t even listen to them any more. She thought of Lola. The rain bat down on the veranda roof. He was probably in the barn.

‘She has always been a bit odd,’ her mother said. ‘Sometimes she wouldn’t speak for days. We thought a man would change that, but no such luck.’

Then they stopped talking about the matter, because Lola’s father joined them at the table. He sometimes shouted that they should shut up. They took that into account, because he had a weak heart.

It turned into a beautiful summer. Bert curtly introduced Lola to his new Heck cattle. The heifers were surly and solid, and claimed a piece of the meadow. There the five of them stood grazing. Now and then they cast a hostile glance at the rest of the herd.

‘Gorgeous animals,’ said Bert. ‘And how are you?’

Lola smiled and opened her arms when Lola came running up to her. As always she had brought some celery for him. He curled his purple tongue around it and chewed on it for a long time while she caressed his nose with her nails.

If Bert wasn’t there, she would sometimes climb over the fence. Then she joined Lola, so that he was also a little group. Since the arrival of the Heck cattle he had become rather isolated. Occasionally she brought a rough brush, which she used to brush Lola’s back for minutes on end. At regular intervals he looked up at her appreciatively. Sometimes Lola and Lola walked wildly through the meadow together and it would happen that they both lowed a bit. That made the Heck cattle ever more restless. When Lola left, Lola followed her to the fence. He stayed there until his friend had climbed over it and had disappeared around the curve with her bike. Sometimes Lola waved one last time and then Lola nodded.

When the first autumn rains changed the country roads into pools of mud, Luc finally left Lola. Her mother helped him to pack. She chided her daughter when she wanted to lend a helping hand.

‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘And you can’t come to eat here for a while, because the neighbours are gossiping about the divorce. Wait until it has blown over.’

'You'd expect her to say something now that we see each other for the last time,' said Luc. 'After all, we've lived together for three-and-a-half years.'

'Yes, it doesn't improve, does it?' said the mother.

They both paused for a moment to see if Lola would say something. When she went to sit by the window, they went on packing. Out of politeness Lola waited until they were finished. Then she pulled on her boots and put some celery in the pocket of her khaki raincoat.

As she had expected, the mud prevented her from getting to the meadow on her bike. She parked it against a silo and went the last bit on foot.

Lola did not come. Not even when she called. He stood there with his back to her and looked thinner than before. She had the impression that he was shivering. The shudder passed to her as she climbed over the fence and ran to him.

She lifted his head with both hands. In his eyes she saw an almost otherworldly sadness. She subjected the bull to a panicky but thorough examination. She stared at his belly for a long time, her hand clapped to her mouth. There was a visible absence between his legs. Bert had worked him over. Her friend was no longer a star of the Zodiac and suffered greatly under it. With her eyes she tried to make clear to Lola the bullock that it made no difference to her. He turned away from her in shame and walked over to the electrified fence. There he stood, his head against it, until Lola chased him away from the ten thousand-volt impulses with a small wooden plank. They both lowed heartrendingly.

When Bert came running up to her, she tightened her fingers around the plank and used it to hit at his face.

'He upset my Heck cattle!' he cried.

Because of her swinging motions she lost her balance. She landed in the wet grass and lay there. She saw how Lola stoically retraced his steps towards the electrified fence, and she knew things would never be right again. Bert kneeled down beside her. She kicked him when he tried to help her up.

'I didn't know you'd hate it this much,' he said. 'He's a beautiful animal all the same. A bullock grows less quickly than a bull, but produces better and tastier meat.'

He should not have said that. A day later his farmhouse burned down and one of his bullocks was stolen. Having escaped from the sea of flames in the nick of time, he sought psychiatric help for the first time in his life.

An anonymous tipster talked about a bullock in her daughter's garden. When the police called on Lola, however, the garden was empty. The policemen found it hard to believe that the suspect had succeeded in hiding the animal in her house. Although they were patient and agreeable, they made no headway. Lola remained silent until they stopped bothering her.

Group Skipping

Steven skipped three times a week. In a group. Three months ago a leaflet had informed him of the existence of the course. Although the pictures of people skipping in track-suits had put him off at first, he found the accompanying text persuasive. ‘Why stop skipping when you turn nine?’ bold letters shrieked from a fluorescent background. It was a question Steven had asked himself many times before.

As a child he’d got around mostly by skipping. He remembered exactly how carefree and relaxed it made him, how quickly he’d been able to get from one place to another, and how often his skipping had made him spontaneously burst out laughing. For a long time he’d skipped home from school with a girl from the neighbourhood. Possibly she had something to do with that feeling of ecstasy. When she moved house he realized he’d been in love with her for several terms. He told her just before her father started the car. She looked at him languishingly through the rear window for a long time. All the same, she didn’t answer the letter he sent to her new address a week later. After she left, Steven skipped alone. Although it consoled him, he stopped doing it after a while. From one day to the next he took to walking. When in a hurry he sometimes ran. He must indeed have been around nine at the time, maybe ten. The same change had come about in his classmates too, he realized. He didn’t know why.

On a cloudy afternoon in spring, when Steven was about twenty, he was standing with a friend near a meadow, smoking a cigarette. Three horses galloped by. He was captivated by their hooves, which again and again, very briefly, but unmistakably, hovered, all four, above the earth. The action enthralled him and then filled him with an intense nostalgia. Steven envied the horses their fleeting triumph over gravity. As a child his feet had been capable of the same trick. Hesitant but curious, he tried a few rusty skips. His action soon grew more supple and from nowhere an unexpected, hissing laugh slipped out between his teeth. He stopped when he noticed both his friend and the horses giving him irritated looks.

In the seventeen years that followed, Steven skipped selectively. A couple of times he tried skipping his daughter to school. She didn’t like it. The other parents and staff were alarmed when he delivered the crying child to the middle of the school playground, arms swinging, legs flying. His wife called his hobby the last straw and left him. In the end he simply stopped. Now and then he skipped a little in his apartment, which was really too small for it.

So it was only to be expected that the course would appeal to Steven. His joy at the social acceptance of skipping was huge. Although he didn’t regard himself as a joiner, it pleased him to know that other enthusiasts existed.

In the first few lessons they smiled at each other a lot. Sandra, the instructor, a woman of about forty, put them all at their ease and made sure any embarrassment was held at bay. The phenomenon had been the subject of scientific research, which showed that skippers were anything but crazy. Sandra explained that children skip because they weigh less. Since human beings have an instinctive tendency to conserve energy, the far heavier adult subconsciously feels the skip to be an unnecessary drain on bodily resources.

'Which makes skipping a wonderful way to burn up calories!' Sandra whooped. 'You'll notice an improvement in your mood as well! Come on, open up and rejuvenate yourself! Rediscover the child! Let the child out! Jump, hop, skip!'

She promptly tried out several varieties of skipping. Seeing her pupils were impressed, she reassured them with a laugh that they'd begin at the beginning.

Steven's feelings towards Sandra were ambivalent. He found her rather boisterous and saccharine, although there was certainly something likeable about her and her enthusiasm was infectious. At her command he skipped to the left, to the right, forward and back, arms stretched high or hands to his sides, unstoppably fast or almost as if in slow motion, to the rhythm of human breathing or to loud music, individually or in a circle. Usually he felt better afterwards.

Soon everyone knew he was called Steven and after the first week Steven knew all the other participants by name: Ann, Lesley, Liesbeth, Tamara and George. A small group. Two thirds of them women. No one missed a lesson. It had to do with the skipping urge and a sense of obligation, but it quickly became a matter of friendship as well. They increasingly looked forward to the half-hours before and after lessons too. They liked being together. Liesbeth, who worked in a restaurant, brought dainty desserts with her now and then. Lesley sometimes sang a song to round off, accompanying herself on the guitar. It was rather like a warm family or a successful kids' summer camp. Whenever he saw group members link up as they talked and laughed, binding him in with them, Steven felt as if a lukewarm fountain was gushing from his larynx into his nose.

On the weekends when his daughter visited, Steven tried to explain to her that there really was such a thing as reconciliation. That people could still get along. He'd experienced it himself. She flashed him the same dirty look every time and made it very clear that nothing he said interested her, then carried on phoning or messaging. She'd grown disconcertingly fat, which made her look much older than thirteen. It occurred to Steven that skipping wouldn't do her any harm. When he began telling her this, though, she shouted – in a tone Steven still recalled from her mother – that he'd lose his weekends with her. A threat that worked.

Steven couldn't think what wrong he'd ever done the child. It was probably his ex who'd turned her against him. Still, he had never put the slightest obstacle in the way of his ex either, as far as he could see. She was the one who'd come after him, who'd wanted him for a husband and to have his child. He'd thought she was pretty, and children reminded him of skipping. Less than a month after their daughter was born his wife began snarling at him that he was useless and understood nothing. Whenever Steven pleaded with her to explain exactly where the problem lay, she usually answered: 'Oh, just go off and skip.' In the end she left. There wasn't even anyone else. She'd rather live alone than with him.

In the first few months after his wife left, Steven occasionally asked himself just what his part in her rage had been. On a couple of occasions he didn't get out of bed in the morning, since it suddenly seemed very plausible to him that the breakdown had been

his own fault and that he'd actually been carrying it around inside him all along. But the next day that kind of defeatism would seem so overdone that he promised himself not to agonize over it any more. It didn't matter in the end whose fault it was. In any case, he kept discovering that relatives, colleagues and people who shared railway compartments with him were in fact occupied all the time with the blowing of bridges and breaking of bonds. This wasn't exactly a cheerful discovery, but Steven could live with it.

In the company of Sandra, Ann, Lesley, Liesbeth, Tamara and George though, he had the impression that social wormholes existed. Steven began to believe in conversation, in pacts and the impetus they gave. When he thought about his new friends, he sometimes caught himself using hackneyed metaphors. The group appeared to him, for example, as a flaming torch shedding light in the darkness, or as a life-raft.

Steven developed such a remarkable friendship with George that for a while he started to question his sexual orientation. In the end the two men never went all the way physically. Steven did once clutch George's hand while they were skipping. George made it known in a friendly way that he couldn't reciprocate those kinds of desires. Despite this, the bond between them grew steadily firmer. George was the stronger of the two and Steven the faster, which helped foster a mutual admiration. They often went for a cup of coffee together.

The group members casually accepted each other's foibles. Like the time Lesley's guitar slipped from the grasp of the clumsy Ann, while she was moving it. The instrument was damaged. Ann wanted to pay the cost of repairs. Lesley wouldn't let her.

'This course is the best thing that's ever happened to me!' an emotional Tamara exclaimed after twelve lessons. Everyone agreed about that. It was the first time their skipping ended in a group cuddle.

'Competition!' Sandra exclaimed. 'National!'

Murmurs of astonishment arose and abated. They didn't even know there were other clubs in the country, or that competitions were held.

'And after that: international!'

They discussed their chances.

'Everyone can skip,' Sandra said. 'Not everyone can skip together.'

They unanimously agreed they were unbeatable as far as their group mentality went. Everything else would follow from that. They'd have to practice hard, especially their speed; they hadn't done much of that up to now.

For three months they trained on the running track at a stadium in a nearby town. They skipped relays as well as personal records at four and eight hundred metres. They practiced hurdle skipping too, using special low hurdles. Everyone felt it would be better

to train every day. There was no time to waste.

In retrospect Steven realized that their unity had begun to erode almost as soon as the unforeseen plan raised its head. Even though that wasn't clear for a while. At first they smiled as they cursed when overtaken by members of their own group. But the

white of the finishing line was an ever more powerful lure and the starting gun sounded more penetrating each time. The faster they went, the further they wanted to leave the rest of the group behind.

The first incident occurred during relay training. Ann and Lesley got embroiled in an argument about the proper technique for passing the baton smoothly from hand to hand.

‘For a start, you pass on the baton as you land,’ Ann began.

‘No you don’t. While you’re on the up-skip. Everybody knows that,’ Lesley interrupted her. ‘I reckon you’re simply not holding the baton properly. It’s not unusual for you to drop things.’

Several people joined in her laughter.

Sandra tried to smooth ruffled feathers by announcing that as far as the relay race went they’d concentrate first on technique and only later on speed. Tamara thought that was a bad idea. Time was getting on and she’d worked too hard at improving her personal best to let anyone slow her down now.

Tight lipped and eyes peeled, the team went on skipping. The first to attack Steven was Liesbeth. She claimed he’d run a stretch of the eight hundred metres. If he did anything like that during the championships they’d all be disqualified.

‘That’s absurd!’ Steven protested fiercely. He looked at each of his fellow team members in turn, hoping they’d defend him against this false accusation.

‘I think I saw that too.’

As George said this, he examined his training shoes intently.

Steven knew then that it wouldn’t last much longer.

He was right. Three weeks later Ann didn’t show up. It was the first time anyone had missed training and the others felt anxiety clutch at their throats. They all knew participation in the championships would only be possible if their team was made up of at least six people. They sent Ann a friendly card and paid her a surprise visit three days later. When Ann called them a bunch of hypocrites, they each became angry in turn. But there wasn’t a great deal of conviction in it any longer.

Sandra tried to get herself signed up to skip in Ann’s place. When the Coordinating Organization refused to allow that, she too threw in the towel. With great regret, she claimed, but patently also with some degree of relief.

During their final meeting, at the club house for old time’s sake, the remaining group members tried skipping a bit to relax. In the long wall mirrors they watched as embarrassment tugged them to a standstill. Afterwards no one drank coffee. Nor was there any backslapping. Since they each anticipated needing all the luck in the world, no one wished it to anyone else. They walked away quickly in different directions.

Across the weekend when the championships were held, Steven took his eyes off the television screen only to sleep or to visit the toilet. His daughter called him a spineless twerp and a pathetic vegetable. He didn’t contradict her and barely flinched when she rang her mother to announce she’d be home every weekend from now on. At most he was slightly startled by the slam of the door that signalled the child’s disappearance from his life.

What had started as a temporary rhythm became his mode of existence. His fridge contained nothing but a half-empty mustard jar and a rotting mandarin. The voice of his boss on the answering machine, who threatened him with the sack twice a week, left him cold. Even when both his beard and his lawn reached armpit level, Steven didn't feel capable of doing anything. He prepared himself mentally for the Apocalypse and spent his days channel-surfing. His attention was sporadically drawn to a shootout in Baghdad or a weatherwoman's breasts. Usually he didn't notice what was happening on screen.

That Steven's inertia came to an end after a few months was all down to Apollo 11. In a documentary about the moon landing, shots never previously broadcast showed

Buzz Aldrin skipping across the moonscape. Steven stood up with a jerk. His leg muscles trembled from months of neglect and with the thrill of the moment.

'Walking or running in moon sand is laborious,' a deep voice-over declared. 'In space, skipping represents an efficient alternative.'

They were words of deliverance. His expertise was being called upon here.

Aldrin gave him the thumbs-up.

Aldrin issued him with an invitation.

The earth was in the grip of the eternal war between potential winners and losers, whose doggedness made them lose sight of the fact that they were constantly switching places. If Steven succeeded in surviving the conflict by isolating himself, by avoiding humanity, if he was still there after all the winning and losing, then he would be ready for space. He left the house at a still unaccustomed skip. The prospect of leaving the earth filled him with a sunny longing. He imagined nestling inside a space shuttle. The world was too small for people like Aldrin and him. As his feet found a regular rhythm, it occurred to Steven that he must go on and on perfecting himself. Failure could not be an option.