

Small Days

Bernard Dewulf

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Translator Susan Massotty

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He wakes up in battle mode. As far as he's concerned, the hostilities can begin, but the enemy isn't in the mood: Every morning it gets harder to hoist yourself into your armor. The aggressor is greatly disappointed. He savagely pushes his pajama sleeves back down and strangles his teddy bear.

Why do you always want to fight, I ask in the neutral territory of the bathroom.

Because it's fun.

Why is it fun?

He shrugs. 'Cause I'm the strongest. A short sniff, followed by a frown of concentration.

Breakfast is traditionally a demilitarized zone. But he's on the alert, scowling intently. With a moustache he's a mini-Viking.

Once the toast has been dispatched, I poke him. That's the signal. One indescribable movement is all it takes to bring him into the desired stance.

His face is grateful and grim. He looks at me one last time, then begins to box, beat, pound, pant, and groan, giving it all he's got, no holds barred. He's having the morning of his life.

In the middle of the storm I wonder: Is he taming himself? Is he beating the man out of the boy? Do fathers tame their sons by lovingly taking their punches, morning after morning? Who can tell. Forty years from now he'll be searching for the boy in the man. Then he'll feel like slugging it out from time to time, but where will his favorite enemy be?

All of a sudden he stops. He rolls his sleeves back down, a look of sheer bliss on his face. My boy is ready to do battle with the other little men at his school.

Are you Grandpa? she asks. It's not a question, it's a marching order. A doll drops into my lap and we're off. I'm Grandpa, she's Mother, the doll is Baby.

Mother (i.e. she) comes home from work. Has Grandpa (i.e. me) taken good care of her (the doll)?

No, I say to tease her. You're supposed to say yes, she says. Was that a burp? she asks. Don't look at me, I exclaim. Not you, silly, the baby. She snatches the doll out of my lap and gives it a good shake. You burp her like this, she says.

Now you're the teacher, she informs me. Next I'm the dead godfather.

Then just plain Daddy. After that Mommy. Then Grandpa again. And so on.

Until everyone and everything in her young psyche has been slotted into place.

At lightning speed, as if time is already short, she switches from one context to another.

Somewhere inside her is a chip that's still clean, while mine is covered in dust. With the minutest of

gestures, intonations, facial expressions, and poses, she moves effortlessly through hierarchies, relationships, and family ties. The living, the dead, inanimate objects, human interactions—they're all equal under her simple yet unfathomable law. In five minutes she conjures up a make-believe society that she rules with an iron hand.

It's a heady despotism. As long as I maintain a charade of servility, she's an enlightened despot. But when my imagination flags, my interest fades, or I'm too strong-willed, she sternly issues her deadliest proclamation: "You don't know who you are."

Her lip begins to droop. The doll crashes to the floor. Now that the rehearsal for her view of the world had ended, Grandpa, teacher, and all the rest retreat into the dusky wings.

That was also my favorite toy, I say. He's playing with his Meccano set, and an age-old smell drifts through the living room and into my head. Back in the past, you mean, he says without looking up. The past will come later. His brain is busy making the right connections.

Roughly half of his short past has already been lost. The other, younger half is more of a long-stretched-out yesterday than a span of two or three years. So how is he supposed to know that his father has a past?

When will that past really dawn on him for the first time? Perhaps only on the day that an ordinary smell—which has survived unobtrusively for thirty or forty years—evokes today's ordinary moment and presents it in an extraordinary light in his living room and in his head.

Then, all at once, he'll have an awful lot of past. His own, from when he was with his parents and when he was by himself; his parents' past, from when they were children; his parents' past from when they were parents; his grandparents' past; his own children's past.

Somewhere an internal Meccano motor will start up. Bits and pieces will beg to be assembled. A smell, apparently coming from nowhere, will waft by, and suddenly the motor will switch into high gear. New parts will appear, requiring new connections. And so it will never stop, until it ends.

So he sits innocently in his first living room today, tinkering with his past.

And with the bits and pieces in my head.

The children have been temporarily donated to a good cause: their fun and my rest. A whole week of peace and quiet stretches out before me. These will be unforgettable days, filled to the last tick-tock of the clock with relaxation, licentiousness, and masterpieces.

The clock itself will stop. Time will come down, sit in its customary place at the kitchen table, stretch its restless legs, and take the time to have a leisurely look around. Things will lie mutely where they were left, doors will close of their own accord, candy will remain uncoveted in the cupboards.

Wrinkles will cease to crease, attention will return from being scattered, brains will cool off in their craniums.

I'll do seven movies, six spotless sidewalk cafés, five full-length operas, four whine-free walks, three self-serving breakfasts, two forgotten breasts, and one uncensored cigarette. Not once will I say "don't touch."

In between times I'll discover the secrets of the night, coax the belladonna out of neglected female eyes, transform the world until the break of day, and stand weeping by the river, moved to tears by the splendor of the sunrise and the hammering in my head.

I will greet the garbage men with brotherly bonhomie, eye the commuters on the earliest streetcar with triumphant glee, return home in an inscrutable mood, insert the movie, switch on the opera, fondle the forgotten breasts, sniff the night-time scent rising from my daddy clothes until it nestles deep in my memory, rediscover the basic simplicity of breakfast and the cruel silence of a world

without children. And I will walk. I will restlessly circle the kitchen table, where time sits, waiting to be excused.

Unbearable, that's what these days will be.

It's a summer evening and twilight is falling. The little boy in the sweltering garden is climbing a tree. I sit inside the house, my ears attuned to global news, and see it happen before my eyes. The day is going down, the little boy is going up. He climbs higher and higher into the descending day, which sinks even lower to meet the ascending boy.

It's as if the day finally embraces him. As if he dons the day for the night.

It's an event.

The agility of the twilight and the boy. Their perfectly supple synergy.

The arrogance of the day, the acquiescence of the boy. The day that looks after him as it sinks lower and lower, the way we think ending days do.

The boy seats himself on too thin a branch. I see it happen before my eyes, but the tree is merciful: The branch inexplicably expands. Something inside me believes that now—in this interminably long moment—all of life is willing to be merciful to my boy in the tree. Even the doubtful branches are willing to support him.

The little boy sits and looks. Grass and time at his feet.

How small he is, high up in the tree. How swiftly he disappears in the deepening darkness. How powerful he is, the prince of twilight. How happy he is, king of the realm with his father far away in the house. How lost he is to me now in the descent of the days. How he waves to me from his perch, both arms casually in the air. How he seems to fly away. How I wave back, paralyzed in the light.

What if the evening lets go of my little boy? What if the evening, for some reason, skips over me, inside the house, and leaves him to the thin branches, to the treacherous fall?

Let it rip!

It's the official battle cry. He shouts it like Tarzan.

We yank our ripcords and the two tops fly into the wok.

His is real, mine is fake. Mine is held together by layers of tape, his sparkles with ferocity.

He nagged me for weeks to buy a "real" Beyblade. No more fairground knockoffs. For weeks I said I'd had enough. That one more rip and I'd flip.

One more spin and I'd pack it in. That marbles had, after all, survived for centuries.

Gradually, however, I was tempted by the siren song of Dragoon and Draciel, the infantile fiction of the Beyblade universe. Parenthood exposes the strangest gaps in the psyche. I've nearly started to believe in it myself.

How according to the official terminology Dragoon "circles the stadium looking for the best attack position" and Draciel "defends his turf from all comers."

I'm besieged from every corner. Sparks fly up out of the wok.

This wok, a rusty relic from more child-free days, is our so-called stadium.

No store-bought version for us. He who says "a wok is a stadium" is a magician. That's something he needs to learn.

Kill 'em, Master Dragoon! he shouts now. Standing with his legs planted firmly apart, he leans over the stadium on the kitchen floor. With a vicious thrust of his hip, Master Dragoon knocks my Draciel out of the wok. Little arms fly into the air. Father, held together by mere tape, soars through the kitchen.

You see, he says, Master Dragoon is the best.

Then it's my turn to be Dragoon, I say.
Do you believe in him? he asks.
You bet.

Because she can always be whoever she wants to be, she's been given a stethoscope. A real one.
Now she can examine whoever she wants to for real.
To see if they're sick or faking it. We all have to have something these days.
Permanent hypochondriacs inhabit the house. Sometimes she pronounces us cured, sometimes dead. Sometimes she isn't sure. If we behave ourselves, she says, she'll let us live, if not . . . And she puts on her saddest face.
She varies her endless series of diagnoses to make sure the sick don't get bored. That way they'll keep on playing.
After my thirteenth ailment, I tell her that I've come to see her because I'm as healthy as a horse.
No, you're not, she splutters. Yes, I am, I say. Listen with your stethoscope. Pouting, she places that difficult word over my heart.
I don't hear a thing, she says, you're dead. No way, I say. Give it to me. She refuses. Surely I'm allowed to listen to my own heart? I protest. Humph, she replies.
Then, halfway through my life, I find myself listening for the first time to my own heart. No doctor ever had the idea of letting me participate in my own body. It's such a heartless world.
I listen breathlessly. At first there's only a dull crackling and crinkling—like radio static. That must be the sound of my body. My body crackles and crinkles like an internet connection. I try to find a melody. Then something swells up out of the tumult and disappears as swiftly as it came. It's a heartbeat. But it's not a beat, it's a swelling, which resonates with a deep, languorous bass. The heart is a swelling bass.
Do you hear anything? she asks. Yes, I answer. Then you're alive again.
She wants to listen to her own heart, but no matter how hard we try, she doesn't hear it. I don't have a heart, she says. Yes, you do, I say. You have a beautiful heart. But I don't hear it. Keep listening, I say. Keep listening.

Wednesday afternoon. He's dangling from a climbing rope in his childhood and teaching himself to whistle. He wants to go through life whistling, like his friends. The same afternoon finds me sitting on a bench, not really whistling, though I know how to. I also know how to read the newspaper.
There's an article in the paper about him. About the commercialization of his social environment. Nowadays he's a market. He's suspended in a "mediatized" childhood.
Don't suck, I tell him, blow. Pucker your lips, like a fish.
"Adults often give the impression that they're somehow above the world of children." That's what the article says. What a strange sentence. Where are they supposed to be: Below it? Inside it? Next to it? "They bemoan the commercialization of the world of children, though they themselves live in a commercialized world." What a strange argument. We mustn't complain about commerce anymore because/since/seeing as how it affects every aspect of our lives.
Put your tongue against your lower teeth, I say. And suddenly it works.
His first whistle. We cheer.
This is about you, I say. Immediately, in a burst of overconfidence, he tries out an astonished whistle. Some guy at a university, who's made a study of you, says: "I suggest that we abolish the distinction between the world of children and the world of adults."
I look up at him. What do you think? He puckers his lips, but no sound comes out. Keep trying, I say. In the meantime, I suggest that we abolish distinctions.
Between night and day. Between men and women. Between myself and others. Between past and present.

Good and evil. Backs and bellies. Speech and silence. Life and death. Inside and outside. Clothed and naked.
Wishing and whistling. Dream and reality.
Kindergarten and university.

I've read that people who feel happy at least once a day will live to a ripe old age. It triggers a beneficial reaction in our chemical laboratory, some kind of hormonal thing that fights off demons. I'm sure to live to a ripe old age. After all, I get to take my son to school every day.£
It's an elaborate ritual.

Jacket on. Don't forget the book bag. And the lunch. Shoelaces tied. Bike wheeled outside. Helmet on: sometimes a tournament knight's headgear, but at this time of year a cap and scarf and mittens. Book bag on his back. Feet on the footrests. Hold on tight. His response: Yeah-yeah.

When they begin to say "yeah-yeah," they're making progress.

Then we're off. Bicycling together, hallelujah. Sometimes he sings. My little boy behind me on the bike, singing in the winter light. Sometimes an early-morning grouch on the footpath looks up and smiles. If my son goes on singing like this till I die, I'll live to a ripe old age.

Sometimes I join in, while the traffic rushes past our indestructible duet.

I'm singing to ward off fate. He's singing because he's still a bird.

He won't continue to sing until I die. That's another reason I add my voice to his. To out-sing the time. And to keep him—and time—here with me, biking to school.

It's an elaborate ritual at school too. Helmet off, book bag on the rack, hug, be good, yeah-yeah, bye Daddy, and he's gone. Skipping. Skipping in and out of memory.

This is where his own secret day begins.

I stand there, observing it. Always trying to observe it a bit longer. All those birds on the playground. Flapping around, having the time of their lives. Always trying to store it up a bit longer. Tomorrow it might be over.

Tomorrow he'll be too big. Too grown up. Tomorrow he'll have stopped singing. Tomorrow he'll bike past me. Whizzing full speed ahead, escaping into his future.