

Charlotte Van den Broeck

Original titles and publishers
Kameleon (De Arbeiderspers)

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Astrid Alben

© Charlotte Van den Broeck/Astrid Alben/De Arbeiderspers/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.

Bucharest

Some places are so small
they'd fit on the tip of a finger.
I try to point at where everything was
but I can barely remember.

Among the rubble of forgetting stands
my grandfather's bookcase and that Sunday afternoon
when we read the atlas together, his finger
resting on the capital of Romania.

'A smashing bunch of slags' they had, he said
and I thought a slag was some sort of Eiffel Tower
and resented him for never bringing me back a miniature version.

Later I learned that borders and grandfathers are relative.
Only that afternoon is marked in the atlas
by raised alphabet letters, as the afternoon
when I still saw in him the most perfect guide.

Sisjön

A grandfather and child stand naked at the edge of the lake.
We decide that this is natural,
stare politely at our toes whilst stepping out of our clothes.

We force our cheeks into a smile.
One glance wipes away the innocence of my bathing suit.
This is how we glide into the water, impish.

We swim across the lake, breaststroke
feels strange without the contours of a swimming pool.
I talk about my mother's breasts floating on the water in the bath.
How they seemingly contradicted gravity.

We smoke ciggies on top of your sleeping bag, for me a first.
My gums feel like a dried apricot stone,
but I tell him it tastes all right.

In the morning the sun burns us out of our tent,
where we find the dead chick.
Whatever it was, it was defenceless.

Växjö

There's a lightness in the air that wrings.

We look like kids washed up in the corner
of the playroom, fists bawling on the mat,
screaming that their bodies are bursting at the seams.

At noon we stare into the sun with bulging chameleon eyes,
the world smudged in coarse grease pencil lines.
There's no noticeable difference between the hand and the table
just the transition of matter.

In the wavering image of magnified pixels
a girl's hair sways in long ponytails, hair
that isn't yet a trump card but a burden when she plays.
When she walks the tails swish like whips.

A lethargy weighs everything down:
more mass on top of the same surface area
causing things to tumble off somewhere
along the margins of the world.

There's a lightness here that wrings.
As if it's all just a marble alley
a way from up to down
until someone lifts us up again.

Hvannadalshnúkur

Fingertips, suction pads, don't fall asleep now
if you don't fall asleep now we will talk now
we can talk, here, on top of these sheets
talk about the pale hills across the water,
the sods of grass where we sat
where we hadn't sat together yet, summers
we experienced separately, the lighter of our hair
and the longer of the days, here, on top of these sheets

make sure you don't break now, the scorpions in my bookcase
are travelling tonight, it's safe now, the heat
on the windows, the steam from your stories, it's almost
morning on top of these sheets, a final hour, here
in my languid loins, stay, talk a little now
in the languidness of my loins

about: bellybuttons, the silly season, talk a distant land in my ears
the branches on sturdy trees lining the sound of the words
here, fevered dreams, here, on top of these sheets knurs for hands
and bowls of thirst, white lilies in the living room, the walls
long-forgotten blueprints, the innocence of rain worms
in a child's mouth, we can talk here, on top of these sheets.

Bulls head

Ever since I was born an enormous bulls head rages
in my mother's belly. It's on a rampage in her empty womb

creating scars in the fallow mother. Sometimes
she doesn't quite recognise me, which is troubling

because at one time I fitted inside her perfectly. Luckily,
according to the astronomical constellation of Cancer

I'm pleasure seeking, reliable and creative. She finds this consoling,
an article of faith connecting amniotic fluid to the universe.

Whenever we had chicory baked with gammon, I'd get the crust of cheese.
All of it. Because I'd asked for it.

The love I know is dished up from a casserole,
the two extra helpings on a full plate
that second biscuit hidden in the yellow pud.
This is a typical feature of motherly conduct:

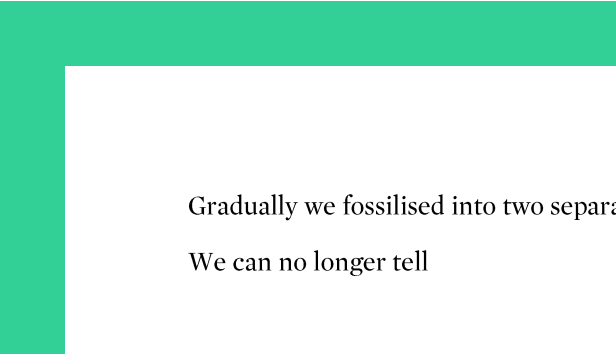
'Stuffing ones young'.

In exchange for the void I left in her, she wanted me full and round.

Then came the morning I announced the arrival of two small breasts.
The news broke her spirit for days.

Eventually she handed me a bra,
emblazoned with Hello Kitty.

Deep inside her belly raged the snorting bulls head.
A void is emptiness only when nothing else will fit.



Gradually we fossilised into two separate creatures.

We can no longer tell

who became the insect and who

turned into amber.