FLANDERS LITERATURE

Papinette

Kristien Dieltiens

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Translator Laura Watkinson

Beyond the vegetable garden lay a pale blue meadow of flowers. It was endless and as blue as the heavens above my head. I did not yet know that they were flax flowers, just as I did not yet know that heaven existed. I knew nothing. Nothing but the taste of milk, the scent of my mother's body and the firm tenderness of four pairs of women's hands, which took it in turns to carry me, plait my hair and give me gentle taps to keep me away from the fire.

Everything was big, everything was good. I wanted to run and to keep on running, through the flowers, my arms spread open wide. My fingertips touched the flowers and they knew that I existed. They nodded their blue heads at me. I panted, could not stop, wanted to touch everything, to breathe it in, to drink it. The world belonged to me.

That must be my first memory. Since that day, I have stored up everything I have felt, tasted, heard, smelled and seen, a hundred times over, just as pumpkins and squashes store their seeds.

I was small for a child of three and no one saw me in the meadow; I was wearing a blue dress, because I was a child of Our Lady.

I heard my name, 'Paaa-pi-net-te!' It was my mother. She called a second time and I grew thirsty for her. I ran and stumbled, but did not find her. I was out of breath and I desperately needed to pee.

After a while, I heard no more calls. Where was my mother? I gathered my skirt into a bundle and crouched down. The gush of liquid was warm and strong – I held my breath – and I watched as the bubbling stream washed away the ants. I carved new channels in the dry earth with my finger; the stream flowed a different way, but the ants kept on walking in the same direction. I was not alone. Someone else was sitting amongst the flowers; I could hear rapid breathing. Someone was watching me and keeping very still. I waited there, squatting, listening, and saw nothing but the swaying of the flax flowers.

Suddenly my name rent the air, tearing it to pieces, four times over, like the cry of startled curlews. The flowers took fright, the birds flew away, the blue over my head trembled and the hem of my blue dress grew damp. My four mothers called my name. I stood up, the flax-blue flowers moved and someone leapt up and took to his legs. The meadow was too big, the air too thin, my dress too wet. I could see no way out and I started crying.

My mothers looked for me and found me. They took me to the big kitchen, where I could swallow down my tears with their milk and pieces of sugared date.

The first person to tell me that my life was destined to be overflowing with good fortune was my mother. And she knew all about things overflowing, because she came from the hamlet of Oosterweel, close to the dyke of the River Scheldt. The dykes were unstable there; nowhere was the sea so rough and unpredictable. This often caused the dyke walls to crack and the sea flowed over the land, as had happened before during the Flood of Saint Felix.

My mother was called Aleid, as was my grandmother, whom I never knew, but who apparently had the same white skin and pale grey eyes as me. My mother had the muscular arms of a man and at the age of sixteen she was the best peat-cutter for miles around. Those arms and her appetite for warm milk with honey both saved her life and gave life to me.

As she was so strong and quick, she worked on the topmost layer of the peat bog, the only woman amongst the men and older boys. She used a peat iron to cut the peat to size, while the rest of the women stood below and piled up the peat bricks, so the children could wheel

them away in barrows. The women were jealous of her beauty and jeered at her, but still no one wanted to take her place. She paid them not the slightest attention and did as she pleased, just as she always had done and later showed me how to do as well, so that I too would do as I pleased for the rest of my life. She had full breasts, she was still a virgin and she was able to speed up the men's work rhythm simply by bending forward and digging her peat iron into the ground.

Everything went well until she was eighteen and the Grim Reaper formed an alliance with the sea.

One hand raised to her brow, she watched the horizon as it turned grey and violet. The clouds were the shape of giant cauliflowers and hung so low that they almost drowned in the seawater, which was by now an inky black, just like the wall of sky on the horizon.

'The earth is tearing apart!' she called to the men, but they would not listen to a virgin with full breasts that they were not allowed to touch. It was noon and the church bell in the distance had sounded the angelus. They passed around the sack of beer and the rye bread, and slapped her buttocks, which were as round as balls of cheese.

In the distance, my mother saw the sneering threat of the approaching seawater. She instantly recognised the face of the Grim Reaper. In just a few short moments, that sneer grew wider and crueller, the grimace of a gruesome, gluttonous sea monster.

Everyone screamed and ran away. Mothers held their children tight, but could not stop the dark water from washing over them. The top layer of peat mixed with the sea and it was as thick as bean stew.

My mother was big and strong and her arms were as sturdy and beautiful as the back legs

of a Whitsun calf. She pulled herself up on the lowest branch of a pollard willow and clung to it as tightly as a creeper. Even when the wind tore off the branches and my mother plunged into the swirling water, her arms did not let go of the branch.

After an hour, the cries of death around her fell silent. The sea monster had satisfied its hunger for human sustenance. Wherever she looked, bodies, sacks of beer and barrows floated on the rippling rhythm of the satiated sea. Children floated on their backs as though they had suddenly been overcome by the need for sleep. Their arms and legs spread out and their hair caressed the water like a fan of sea grass. The men and women floated with their faces down, as though ashamed because they had not protected their children from this dreadful fate. Around them floated wooden boards from the many turf huts. They could not even be used for coffins.

My mother was one of the village's few survivors. Her copper-coloured skirts floated open, shamelessly, like water lilies in a duke's fishpond.

A wealthy landowner's stable hand pulled her on to dry land and took her in the ox-cart to his master's estate, where she hovered between life and death for a number of weeks.

Afterwards she could not say how long she had been in the water. She awoke in a bed that was far too big and found a cup of warm milk with honey waiting for her. She gulped it down too greedily and spilled some on the sheets. Everything felt strange. The fine flax linen filled with duck down was too soft and the buckwheat pillow felt like a pair of hands supporting her head and caressing her neck. And the bowl of warm milk and honey, which was waiting for her when she awoke, made her realise what it meant to have a life that overflowed with comfort and riches. Her greed became even greater. Her hands touched her body beneath the sheets and she realised she was naked.

At night her rescuer kept her company and made sure that she stayed warm.

She stayed alive, because she was born on the day of Saint Margaret, a noblewoman who had been blown to Scotland by a fierce storm, where she married, had eight children and became a paragon of virtue.

My mother was fed with horse milk, because most of the cows in the sheds in the lower meadows had drowned. For the first time in her life, she slept in a real bed with sheets. If it had been up to her, she would still be there. She told me it was like lying on clouds.

For the first time in her life, she dreamed and because the dream would not leave her mind, she became convinced that Saint Margaret had visited her at night to predict her future. In her dream she saw a little girl splashing away in a sea of milk. The child worked desperately to stay afloat, beating away so violently with her arms that the milk thickened and finally turned into a lump of golden-yellow butter.

'That's when I knew you would be my daughter,' she said.

After an ice-cold winter, the landowner took her to a manor house in Ekeren, a hamlet close to the city walls of Antwerp. She entered into service with Arnoldus De Cock, a good-humoured serge merchant with red hair, a moustache and a goatee. He was married to Anna van Praag, a frosty German woman who was straight up and straight down.

Thanks to her strong arms, my mother became the fourth milkmaid and the second washerwoman. The days of sleeping on clouds were over and milking time began.

I do not know who my father is. My mother told me he was a passing tradesman who sold pretty words and something else, but she could not remember what. She had never seen such beautifully shaped ears on a man before. Those ears were the reason she slipped between the sheets with him, but that does not mean she allowed him on her straw mattress. Her bed – and mine – was up in the loft, a big space above the cowshed, where it was always warm and full of womanly smells.

From the day she arrived, she had to share the room with three other women, my future mothers: Gerarda, the mother who was always first to know everything and to pass it on, so that everyone on the estate knew the latest news. Cathelyne, the most devout one, who taught me to say Hail Marys and Our Fathers and who saved the beads from her broken rosaries for me to make necklaces with. And then there was Hendrieke, the grieving mother with the squinting eyes, who bore children with no heart. My mother Aleid was the youngest and the most beautiful.

My mother saw my father for the first time when she was bleaching the sheets on the meadow behind the cowsheds, close to the pinewood. He came past, just as he must always have been passing by some place somewhere and would probably never pass by that way again, and he asked if she could quench his thirst.

The summer was at its height, everything smelled of hay and grass, her arms were bare and a drop of sweat ran between her breasts, which were still milky white in spite of the high sun. Strands of hair escaped from beneath her cap; all that stooping and bending had made her hair damp and her skin gave off a scent of soap and milk. My father helped her to open out the biggest sheet and he admired her strong arms. ‘Do you think they could pick up a big one like me?’ he asked.

She quenched his thirst and nine months later I was born on those same sheets, while the apple trees blossomed and the blackbirds sang their hearts out. No woman was nearby to help when her waters broke.

She looked in surprise at the flood between her thighs. Pink splashes like petals grew larger on the bleached linen and at first she did not know what was happening to her. The pain that came next seemed to tear her in two. In the light of the sun she saw the face of Saint Margaret, who gave her a friendly nod and told her not to make a fuss. The child might end up facing in the wrong direction, nestle into her heart and die. My mother put a wad of the sheet in her mouth to stifle the cries and thought about the child swimming in the milk and standing on a lump of golden-yellow butter.

This storm broke on the day of Saint Dymphna of Geel and I washed ashore, too small, too thin and wild with hunger. It was just as well my father had disappeared from the face of the earth, Cathelyne said later. She was convinced that one day he would try to claim my virginity. And if I did not do as he desired, he would behead me, as Saint Dymphna’s father had done to her.

Saint Margaret stayed a while longer with my mother and gave further instructions about how she should tie and cut the umbilical cord so that I could become a self-reliant and god-fearing child.

My mother took the lump of meat that was born after me and buried it in a hole beneath the rowan tree. ‘Rowan tree, take care of thee,’ she cried. She knew then that the berries would cure my later wounds and she could rest assured that an extra year would be added to my life.

She laid me in a wicker washing basket, tidied up her skirts and her white chaperon, and returned to the big house. She told everyone she had found me amongst the cabbages. I know better, because I was there. And even though they say that infants just have pap in their heads, I

remember the smell of her womb and her thighs and that did not change until the day she died. My mother smelled of fresh sourdough made with rye flour and buttermilk rising on the shelf above the fireplace.

When my mother appeared with the child in the washing basket, the other women said nothing. It could have happened to them. You are walking through the vegetable garden, admiring the cabbages, which are larger and rounder than in recent years, and watching the storks flying overhead, tirelessly searching for a nest. Suddenly you find a naked child amongst the kale and parsnips. Little pink arms trembling and twitching in the air, face bright red from bawling and a purple umbilical cord still attached to the tiny little body. Then, Cathelyne said, you remember the good deeds that you must perform as a Christian. Clothing the naked, feeding the hungry and giving the thirsty to drink. So you take the child home with you, you wrap it up in worn-out muslin cloths and hope the landowner will not notice.

No one asked any questions, but the glares of the frosty Anna spoke volumes.

Cathelyne found her twins Maaycke and Marieke in the carrot field and they had carrot-coloured hair. Gerarda found Corneel in the hay in the goat shed. He was two years older than me, as were the red-headed twins, and when he laughed, it sounded like a little goat bleating.

Hendrieke had found a child too, but it was dead before anyone had any stories to tell about it. The women tried to breathe life back into the child so that it could be christened, but they did not succeed and ever since there had been a new will-o'-the-wisp in the fenland beyond the pinewood.

Until the ninth day, the most dangerous day, they gave my mother sugar bread with currants and rice pap to eat. After that she had to make do with the usual potage. On the fourth Sunday after my birth she went to church with the women and she promised on her knees before the statue of Our Lady of the Branch that she would have me wear blue clothes for eight years, so I would be a child of Our Lady.

When they came home, my mothers held the traditional birthing meal with hot waffles, made with goose eggs, butter, wheat meal and beer. The waffle irons were red hot and as my mothers passed me around so they could take a look at me and examine my body for marks, one of the irons slid from the hearth. A splash of burning oil fell on my little back. The bean-shaped scar beneath my shoulder blades never went away. Years later it almost brought me a death sentence.

My mother gave me four names at my christening. Aleidis, after herself and my grandmother, and then Hendrika, Gerarda and Cathelyne too, so as not to cause any quarrels with her roommates. All three of them wanted to be godmother in the absence of a godfather.

And because I had been born with an overflowing appetite and drank their milk so eagerly, everyone called me Papinette.

The master of the house needed four women to manage his household. Four women who each, in turn, found a child in the vegetable garden. So no one was surprised that my mother's breasts were filled and overflowing with goodness.

Her milk had a taste that was piercing and sharp. It was the taste of springtime. Insistent and jubilant. Green leek and celeriac, radishes and parsnip, spinach and sorrel. Kittens in the barn and the smell of fresh rain in the yard. The young grass made the cheese creamier and my mother tied

me tightly between her breasts, so I knew I was safe. When I was hungry, I drank. When I was thirsty, I sucked with little gulps, greedy and strong, and sometimes I let go unexpectedly and the milk spurted out of her nipple in a fine spray and I was startled and had to squeeze my eyes shut before the milk squirted over me. I was born hungry and with an appetite for more.

Three of my four mothers had full breasts and I went from one to the other, according to my mood. When I was sad, I ran to Gerarda. Her milk tasted like cauliflower in the summer. Sickly sweet and nutritious. I drank greedily, then put my thumb in my mouth and savoured the taste of salty tears and ebbing sorrow. And so I came to know Corneel. He had a preference for his mother's left breast; Gerarda hated to have uneven breasts, so she often picked me up to drain the right breast at the same time as the left. Corneel might have been bigger and older – he could already stand on his own two feet – but I could suck more powerfully. As we drank, we looked into each other's eyes, unaware that, sucking away together, we were linking our fates.

When I did not get my way and became fractious, I was allowed to drink from Cathelyne, who carried the sour scent of salsify and autumn in her armpits. I sucked with a clenched jaw and dug my fists into her breasts to control the flow of the milk. With all my might, I pushed my breath down into my stomach and strained away, my face bright red, and then my mother had to clean my napkins, and she sighed and said my stools smelled of compost and looked like ebony rosary beads.

I could not get enough of their milk and I drank like a drowning person. After three years, when my mother tried to feed me on ground almonds, fruit and vegetables, the taste, which was neither sweet nor mushy, disgusted me. I bawled my eyes out; I missed the warmth of their breasts.

That year Hendrieke had another stillborn baby. Even though the women bound her breasts, which made her look like a boy, the milk still came and my mother let me sleep with her so she would feel the pain of her swollen breasts less. She had the creamiest milk of all and I drank until I fell asleep. So I had my way and I carried on drinking from Hendrieke's breast every morning and evening until my sixth year. The other tastes followed naturally; no one forced me to eat anything, but the smells in the kitchen awoke my curiosity and made me want to taste them.

The world was no bigger than the kitchen and the loft. Because my mother already had enough washing to do, she decided to put me in a wooden high chair until I was three. Jacobus installed a wooden bowl under the hole in the seat, so I would not dirty any more napkins. The bowl neatly caught everything that left my body.

I had a good view of the women, who took it in turns to prepare the food on the big table in front of the fire. Their hands kneaded and slapped the dough for the bread, rolled out pastry and filled pies, stirred cherries and other fruit in big pots, plucked birds, removed the innards from fish and pickled meat.

When I banged with both hands on my wooden table, they knew I wanted to taste. If I started kicking my feet and singing without words, they knew I liked it and they gave me more.

The sounds of the world were happy ones: the music of wooden spoons in copper pans, feet in wooden pattens on the stone floor, chickens clucking around the kitchen, looking for pieces of stray corn, voices in different pitches, the barking dog outside by the fence, the crackling of logs in the fireplace, the gushing of the milk as it filled the churns, cooing women, laughing men, the bell in the chapel, which rang three times a day, the plunger going up and down in the churn and

Hendrieke's song, which she sang every day. '*If my love were a priest, then I should be a nun. I would confess my sins to him, but that surely is not done.*'

I looked down from my elevated position and saw that all was good.

The scents of the world were full and warm, sweet and sharp. Everything smelled of safety and made me long for more. Only the pepper, which they used now and then, took my breath away and made me sneeze. Then Cathelyne would make the sign of the cross and kiss me and promise me that every time I sneezed I released a stubborn little devil that had remained attached to me after my birth. I pictured them running for their lives, with their tails tucked between their legs. They disappeared into the flickering flames of the fireplace, where they found the entrance to hell, which was where they belonged.

I watched the movements of the world. My mother's hands milking the full udders, Gerarda's wide bottom swaying as she removed the innards from the slaughtered pig, the tongues of fire in the hearth, dancing, crackling and sputtering when juice dripped down from the roasting meat, the calming motions of my mothers as they ran the flat-iron over the white damask, Cathelyne's nimble fingers, as she plaited the twins' hair and hid it beneath their starched caps, all those hands kneading and stirring and squeezing...

When evening fell, the world grew larger. My mothers stopped stoking the fire in the big kitchen and left it to smoulder. They wrapped the hams in greasy cloths and poured the whey from under the porous cheese cloths into stone jugs. They lit the oil lamps and the shadows grew longer. The outlines of the walls and doors became dim and the darkness felt like an extra blanket, which was cosy, but also made me suspect that behind the darkness lay another world, a world I did not know.

They lifted me out of my chair and I walked on my little legs, stumbling on my blue dress, to the empty lap of one of my mothers. I bounced insistently up and down on their thighs until they sang. Gerarda was the first to teach me to dance:

'*I have a man, a good, fine man, a man of complaisance.*

He rocks the crib and stirs the pap and makes his baby dance.'

She let me dance on her sturdy thighs and her big hand and my tiny ones did not let go of each other. She passed me on to Cathelyne, whose song taught me, as I bounced on her lap, that beyond the walls of the farmyard was another world:

'*Far and beyond, from Ghent to Derremonde,*

from Derremonde to Beveren, for a barrel of jenever,

from Beveren to Calais, where the babies all eat hay.'

When she reached the word 'hay' she opened her hefty thighs and I fell down between them, squealing with pent-up pleasure, and was caught in her baize skirt. Then I was passed on, together with the jug of beer, but I tried to avoid my mother's lap. The later the evening became, the stronger the smell of beer on her breath was and the sadder her voice. The beer awoke the memory of her mother, father, sisters and brothers, who had perished in the great flood. When she started

to sing, the dancing stopped and even the men quietened down. Her voice, usually so full and warm, became shrill and sharp when she sang, like the skirl of bagpipes.

'The Lord called unto Gabriel

and bade the angel go

dressed in the poorest beggar's rags

down to the world below.

"Sleep, you rich, on your sheets so fine,"

his voice rang across the land.

"Soon you will float upon the brine

at the Almighty Lord's command."

Ghosts will haunt the watering hole

and the mighty sea will resound

with the cries of many a suffering soul

and dread wailing underground.'

After her sad song came the stories about witches and will-o'-the-wisps and I thought it a shame that I was still too young to understand everything. I loved anything that was strange and exciting.

Corneel hid his head under his mother's apron and Cathelyne's daughters held each other's hands so tight that their knuckles turned white and their eyes were as round as fried eggs.

Jacobus liked to tell stories about women who turned into witches and he claimed he knew more witches than women. He had his eye on Hendrieke and wanted to marry her, but she kept stalling him, hoping for someone younger and better to come along. She wanted a man who would give her children with a heart. Jacobus was not discouraged, but said that the male starling had to sing three times before he found the right notes to give a female speckled eggs.

In the year when I was no longer passed from lap to lap, but could dance with my feet on the floor to the notes of Petrus's hurdy-gurdy, Jacobus told the story that made Hendrieke succumb.

'There was once an ancient onion farmer who wanted to marry a young maiden. He loved her and she loved him, because he was a man of means. However, this was not to the liking of the other local menfolk, who wanted to foil his plans. A young and headstrong turnip farmer was the first to pay her a visit and he lent her a beautiful bird in a cage. She immediately fell in love with the bird and wanted to keep it by her side because it could sing so beautifully and made her so divinely happy. The turnip farmer stated one condition though. If she kept the bird in its cage, then she could marry the onion farmer and the bird would remain her property. But if she let the bird fly, she would lose it forever and she would have to marry the turnip farmer. The young maiden took such good care of the bird that it grew until the cage was almost too small. The bird kept

wanting more and more and the day came when she even had to give up her own bowl of pap to feed the hungry bird. She wasted away, while the bird almost suffocated in the cage, which was by now far too small. If she did not want the bird to die, she knew she would have to open the cage. Of course the bird flew away and the headstrong turnip farmer claimed his prize. The woman married the young turnip farmer, but the clever onion farmer did not leave it at that. He bought a magic potion from an old woman on the Eel Bridge for one golden Carolus and he got the young woman to drink it. When the wedding night came and the game of turnips and damsons could begin, the turnip farmer found an onion on his straw mattress where his young wife should have been. He knew this was the revenge of the onion farmer and he thought: I will not allow this fruit to be taken from me. I shall be the first and I shall have her in whatever state I find her in.

Fierce and wild, hasty and hot-headed, he pulled the skirts from the onion until his eyes swelled up and filled with tears. Then he heard a voice from heaven and he knew it was Saint Ursula with her eleven thousand virgins:

Touch not this plant with violence again

Or surely your pleasure shall become pain

Disrobe not this plant but leave it full dressed

Lest your eyes swell with tears and your sins need confessed

If you wish to play gently and to cause her no pain

Speak softly, touch kindly, for honour and gain

Refrain now! Let not your lady be abused

Nor desire and lust in haste be confused

Tear her skirts away now and find only sorrow

And grief and revenge will be quick to follow

The blinded turnip farmer threw the onion out of the window. The enchantment was broken and, weeping, the young woman threw herself at the feet of the old onion farmer.

"Rather a small, faithful starling that stays close to me than a wild bird that flies to other shores," she said and she sang the song of cock-a-doo and cock-a-dee with the onion farmer.'

After the story, Petrus played on his hurdy-gurdy, Hannes blew on his bagpipes and Jacobus sang a grown-up song that made everybody happy. Our mothers put their hands over our ears and stamped their feet to the rhythm of the song that we were not supposed to hear.

'I have a little chicken coop

no finer to be found

a narrow pathway leads inside

with flowers all around

Oh cock-a-doo, cock-a-doo, my sad rooster, what ails you?

Oh cock-a-dee, cock-a-dee, come inside and play with me.'

When Jacobus sang about cock-a-doo, Hannes made one of the pipes shriek in a sad, dull tone and all of the air escaped from the bag. But on the last line, the line about cock-a-dee, the bagpipes would fill again and the sound of the pipe was like a darting bird that had flown high into a tree and was happily singing its heart out. As they sang, my mothers blushed and I smelled the womanly scents rising up from beneath their starched collars. I smelled Hendrieke's longing and I nestled into her lap to breathe everything in.

The next day, the green maypole, a young birch tree with coloured ribbons tied to it, stood on the loft roof. It was not immediately obvious who the marriage proposal was for, as none of my mothers wanted to remain sitting on Saint Anne's shelf. They had heard too many times that there was a man waiting for them up in the moon. They were certainly not the only maidservants who had children but no husband. The owner of the nearby Sterckshof estate had ten women in his service, more than half of whom had one or two children, and only three of them had managed to snare a man with their honey pot.

The cock-a-doo song was the first song that Corneel and I could sing along to and it became my favourite song. It made Hendrieke cry and laugh, it smelled of longings I did not yet know, it made my mother look happy again and it was always a cause of much merriment. And although my mothers said that singing this song was not a suitable activity for children of Our Lady, they still could not stop me from singing it every day. I never allowed anyone to forbid me anything.