FLANDERS LITERATURE

The Rose and the Swine

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An extract

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Chapter one

How I was born, how I was taken care of by elves, how nobody believed I would live, of the miraculous mirror my mother received as a gift from my father, and how my mother died shortly afterwards.

They say I am the most beautiful woman in the world. I have ruby lips, a snow-white skin and hands like precious shells. In the Church of Our Lady stand images of saints created in my image. People say I resemble the Virgin Mary, but the truth is the Holy Virgin resembles me - the sculptors came to me with tears in their eyes and confessed as much.

I was not born beautiful. My beauty came gradually as I grew older. It is the work of the elves. They fed me and took me into their care. Because my beauty comes from them, I cannot escape it, it encases me like a suit of armour. Once I was ugly and incomplete - but undamaged. Now I am complete but damaged. And I cannot return to my original state.

The first woman to see me was my mother, not the midwife Lucretia, unlike at the birth of my two sisters. Lucretia had fled the room as soon as my head appeared. Guilt-ridden, she had paced up and down in the front garden, and every time she'd stuck her head around the bedroom door, my mother had sent her back. There was nobody else in the house. My sisters had been sent to the river and there were never many servants in my mother's household. Although she could not see me yet, my mother knew there was something wrong. Lucretia, whom she knew, was grateful to, and considered a good friend, had to stay away from her as much as possible - a misshapen child would have meant a flogging, a seriously misshapen child could mean imprisonment and the end of her career as a midwife.

The baby couldn't be fully formed. It still had weeks to go inside her body. My mother wasn't too worried, therefore, to let it slip out from between her legs onto the tile floor. It was the elves – sitting on the tiles as usual, heads hunched between their shoulders, smiling – who caught me.

For some reason or other I was born with a heart full of anxiety. As soon as the elves touched me, I knew why: some day my gifts would turn against me. Feeling their sticky little fingers

on my skin, I immediately burst into inconsolable tears. Not because I had been frightened by my fall, but because of the pain that was yet to come.

With her last strength, my mother raised herself up to look at me. Lucretia's herb-drenched compresses fell from her nipples, but she didn't put them back because she was certain that this time she would have no need for milk. To her surprise, however, she saw that I had been born with everything necessary - like every child, I had arms, legs, a torso and a head. My head was round and complete. I had ears, eyes, a nose and a mouth. Her strength flooded back and, making little sucking noises, she wrenched me from the grasp of the tile elves with the resolve of a mother. The elves gazed at their empty hands, crouched and began to chuckle.

'A girl,' my mother said. She already had two and didn't need a third. I wasn't finished, of course. It was only when she'd wiped the blood from my face and body with the end of her undergarment, that she saw what was wrong. Still, she didn't drop me in horror - on the contrary, she bent over me to take a closer look. She found me interesting. The elves on the floor craned their necks to see too.

'Lucretia!' she called. The good woman came in, trembling like a leaf, carrying an earthenware bowl of water from the River Schelde to baptise me before it was too late. Her wrists were still smeared with the blood of Orlinde, the neighbour who had given birth that same morning to a healthy bastard girl. As if afraid of some infection, she kept her distance from me. However, as with my mother, her curiosity soon got the better of her and she approached to touch me and see whether I was real. Although not yet fully formed, tiny and light as a bird, I was moving and bawled the first air into my minuscule lungs. I was as real as could be - only I was transparent. When my mother held me up to the sunlight, it was as if its rays passed right through me, turning my body milky white. Where my bones were, you saw dark shadows. Lucretia had noticed this abnormality when my tiny head was just beginning to emerge - she could see my skull and had thought I would be born without skin.

I had red, swollen eyelids and little grey eyes that my mother immediately recognised as those of the First Woman, the Font of Life. I recognised her voice. In the depths of her belly, I had heard her talk and sing and scold my elder sisters. I was familiar with the lisp of her s's and her low, almost undefined vowels. When my sisters were called in a little later, they bent over me with pursed mouths and wide eyes. I recognised both the shrill voice of Idelies and the more lilting, somewhat older, voice of Richenel. Their faces, however, were as strange to me as that of any other city child. Later I would see they had my father's face. I heard them both shouting with excitement, and it took a while before I realised that this was not in excitement over my arrival but because they had seen the shadow of a goblin-owl in the crown of the oak beside the path. My mother picked me up, made the sign of the cross and looked out the window. High in the crown she could indeed just about see the almost invisible brown bird that had landed there. It sat perfectly still, as if intending to stay a while.

'Has it come to take her?' Richenel asked, jumping up and down.

'I don't know,' my mother said. 'Perhaps it won't find her.' She put me in the walnut casket in which she kept her jewellery, arranged some loose tufts of sheep's wool around me and placed the casket on the warm stones in front of the fire. I had no sucking reflex. I refused her breasts. She fed me by dipping the corner of a linen cloth in milk and wringing it over my gaping mouth. But it wasn't those few drops that kept me alive, it was the pig's milk the elves dribbled from their mouths

into mine at night. A few days later news came that our neighbour Orlinde's baby had died. The goblin-owl in the oak had disappeared.

I was born near a river named The Schelde, which was the border between here and over there. Over there was the city of Antwerp in the dukedom of Brabant. Here was Flanders. For many years Flanders was nothing to me but the dense forest behind me, home only to ghosts, swamps and will-o'-the-wisps. It wasn't important to us, our eyes were turned eastwards, to the river where the Hanseatic cogs sailed. In the morning we saw the sun rise above a serrated skyline – the Church of Our Lady, the Fish Monger's Tower and the Baker's Tower. Further south were St Michael's Abbey and the Calous Hills, towards the north the mills on the Stuivenberg. The city wasn't just separated from us by water, but also by a wall with seven gates and various entrances for waterways. When I was a child, the sight of the chaotic, alien city made me repeat the quick prayers I'd heard my mother murmur when there were strong winds or thunder.

My father first saw me when I was several weeks old. He'd returned from a nerve-wrecking trade mission to England, where he'd haggled over the prices of lead, tin, wheat and wool. Shortly before his arrival, my mother rubbed me with a rough cloth and dipped me in a bucket of cold water to make the blood in my veins run faster, making me look red rather than transparent.

'A girl,' he said with the same resignation as my mother's. He'd never expected a son. My arrival reassured him because it confirmed his destiny. As he bent over the crib, I immediately noticed the brown birth mark in his face. He was marked. Later I would learn that the birthmark on his face was nothing compared to the one on his left shoulder. According to my mother, that one was as large as a child's hand. I never saw it because my forever solitary father did everything to hide his stigma from the outside world. Due to those two marks (the modest one in his face, the large and malignant one under his clothes), he behaved like one fated. He hadn't been able to discover whether it was a mark of God or the devil and because he could not be sure, he played safe and became the most righteous man walking our forests, fields and towns.

He'd been in the port recently, where he'd traded the newly bought bales of wool for reasonable prices and had them transported by carriers who took home a respectable sum at the end of the day. In his endeavour to be virtuous, he not only brought a present for my mother and two sisters, but also one for me, the child he could only have suspected born and alive. It was a small hand-mirror. Its handle was set with cut glass, the back painted with elegant birds. Holding the mirror in front of me, he made soft throaty sounds and repeated, 'Look, look at the baby.' I didn't have time to wonder whether I'd heard his voice before. It was the first time I'd seen myself and I was so shocked by the almost blue face whose skull showed in a smirking grimace that I burst into tears and regurgitated all the milk I had in my little stomach.

It was my father's large hands that lifted me from the wisps of sheep wool. I presented him with a large problem. He could easily see that I was to die soon. I had hardly any blood, my skin was greenish, and my frame was as frail as a bird's. He knew he could never give me what he gave his other children - for the simple reason that he would not get the time for it. He found this so unfair that it physically hurt him. He thought of the long row of porcelain dolls and gilt boxes he'd given my sisters over the years and promised me in a soothing voice that if I were to die, he would buy me an expensive, aspen coffin finished with gilt fittings and a bed of duck down and silk, to make up for everything I would never have during my life.

When my mother noticed he was whispering in my ear instead of wiping away the sour milk that trickled down my neck onto the swaddling clothes, she took me from his lap. He watched

her change me in silence, studying my face and small swollen eyes, which opened wide from time to time, then closed resignedly. He touched my cheek with his broad finger and said hoarsely, 'She could have been so beautiful, this little glass girl.'

I grew up in times of poverty and hunger. I hardly noticed it, but it was said people in Antwerp ate rats. My father was a businessman who wasn't badly off. Every few weeks he took the ferry and sometimes stayed away for months. He bought goods unavailable here – spices and wines, but mostly expensive fabrics and sometimes jewellery. Then he looked for a ship to bring it here, negotiated with the ship's captain, sent it off and came home with a present for each of us in his horse's broad saddle bag.

Three years after my birth my mother got a mirror which was so large she could see her entire face in it. My mother was a beautiful woman but didn't know it. This present was an attempt by my father to show her. The mirror-maker put incredible effort into fashioning the frame. It was cut from hard wood with a deep glow. It shone so naturally it seemed as if not only the reflection, but the frame itself was alive and moving.

For Richenel he brought a expertly-ground looking-glass that made everything look much larger than it really was. She screamed with fear when she pointed it at passing insects. Idelies received a porcelain box within a box with such a fine flower decoration painted on it that it seemed the painter used a brush with a single hair. I myself received three silver bells of a different size. Although I was still very young, I immediately understood why there were three. If I died, my father wouldn't have any difficulty distributing what I left behind fairly. Each member of the family would inherit a bell, my mother the largest one.

My sisters didn't understand my father's reason. When we were on our own, they pulled my hair and said, 'You with the ugly, transparent face, you got more.' They hauled me to my mother's bedroom to show me what I looked like in her mirror. But I wasn't shocked by what I saw anymore. Thanks to the small hand-mirror I'd been given at birth, I was used to my strange, glassy face. To protect myself from their petty harassment, I'd learned to look through the mirror. They forced me to sit down on my mother's low dressing chair and held my face in their hands so I had no choice but to look. For several moments I saw myself, my sunken eyes and thin lips, and my grinning sisters on either side of me, but that image soon vanished. What I saw instead, inside the elegant frame, was a wood full of tall, leafy, waving trees with a muddy path running through it. For days, I didn't know what the image meant, until I sat in front of the mirror again one evening and saw a man on a horse appear at the end of the path. I sat motionless and waited until he came closer. It was dusk and misty, so the apparition seemed a shadow rather than a living creature. It was cold and the man was wearing a wide cloak that fell over the flanks of his horse. Only when he was close and filled the entire mirror did I see the birthmark on his cheek.

'Father,' I mumbled. My sisters pushed me off the chair, sneering. They chased me away, hurling the shells of nuts at my head. I withdrew to a corner of the kitchen where I stayed like a bird resting. The twinkling eyes of the tile elves told me they knew what I had seen in the mirror.

I told no-one what happened. After several unsuccessful attempts, I managed to open the door to my mother's bedroom unaided and climb onto the dressing chair. Sometimes my mother found me there at night, my head lolling and my arms limp on either side of my body. I had fallen asleep watching the slow images of my father's journey far away. I saw him cross ditches and fields, I saw the wisps-o'-the willow beckon in the reeds, I heard the conversations of tree spirits who inhabit the ash and chestnut trees. I saw dusk fall and fell asleep when I knew my father had found

an inn with a straw bed and a tub of water on the washstand. My mother carried me to where I should have been – the short bed in the attic, between my two sisters to keep me warm and keep me from falling out of the bed.

'Father's coming home,' I told my mother one morning as she stirred my porridge to cool it. 'He couldn't find the captain he was looking for.' She stroked my hair with a callused finger and gave me a wooden spoon.

'Be quiet and eat,' she said, 'so that you'll grow nice and plump.' But I didn't eat, as usual. I coughed and my knees buckled when I had to go out to collect fire wood, something my mother couldn't understand, because judging by the holes in her teeth, I'd taken plenty of calcium from her. My father returned that same night, empty-handed, many days earlier than expected.

I followed him on his distant journeys thereafter. 'How vain she is!' my sisters cried when they found me in front of the mirror again.

'That's because she wants to see that she's still alive,' my mother said, her voice thick with emotion. She thought I'd be gone soon. Lucretia had said my liver didn't produce enough blood, which spared me the blood lettings my sisters screamed through whenever they had a children's ailment. 'It's not fair,' they said. They envied me because of the weekly washes intended to make me look fresher. When they only weakened me, Lucretia decided to leave her enema syringe at home and leave my body in the hands of nature. I was so skinny, so fragile, that my mother hardly dared to touch me. She would bend over Richenel in the middle of the night to check whether I was still alive. She wasn't kissing me anymore, she was already bidding me farewell.

My sisters said they had seen the goblin-owl again. Apparently, it perched on the trees around our house regularly. They were suddenly very worried, asked whether I wanted their liquorice and lay close to me at night to keep me warm. But I didn't die, it was my mother who died. It was she who got the aspen coffin with the gold, down and silk my father had promised me at my birth. Lucretia had come when she vomited blood. I was there when she undressed my delirious mother and applied cold compresses. She prepared extracts of herbs in the kitchen and left them to cool in the basement. Although younger than my mother, she walked like an old woman, feeling her way and shuffling up the stairs with difficulty, her eyes already affected by the abscess that would make her blind. The elves on the floor sat purposely in her way but, feeling guilty, jumped away at the last minute.

I stayed at my mother's bedside until the end. Behind her naked body hung the mirror reflecting her pain-stricken image. I looked at her breasts, and particularly her navel, the spot where she had been connected with her mother the way I had been connected to her. Her death-struggle lasted several days. In the end, she could no longer tolerate light, lost the ability to speak, and couldn't feel her limbs. She was unable to feel the sharp objects Lucretia pressed on her skin. Her hands and feet were already cold before she stopped breathing.

After her death, she was never far from me. From a very early age I learned that life and death are the two legs the world moves on. People around me still treated me as if I would not live much longer, and bad omens no longer threatened me. I moved in the grey area in which the living speak with the dead the way young children talk to madmen and dogs to horses. I was not surprised, therefore, when she was there the day after she was buried, dressed in grey, her voice inaudible. I walked through her and placed candles in her stomach. She was patient with me. Now that she was dead, the noise I made didn't seem to bother her anymore. She did what I had seen her

do every day of my life – moved chairs, swept floors, sliced bread. The elves gave her a place to rest when she needed, but she didn't use it. Just as when she was still alive, she was always busy, even when everybody else in the house was already asleep.

Second chapter

How the wart hog entered my life, how the angels became regular visitors to our house, how my father gave me a rose bush, how I became beautiful after all and enchanted passers-by.

A child that loses its mother doesn't have words. I thought, 'They'll come later, when I'm older and understand what it is I'm feeling, here in my fingertips, right under my nails, and also here under my ribs, the spot where you breathe and sigh when you try to do what you cannot'. But I was wrong. The words haven't come, even years later they haven't. There is no way of saying, you cannot say.

Not that there is no solace. Oblivion is solace. You miss someone, but no longer know her name. Her image is a shadow that disappears when the candle is blown out. You no longer smell her when the house is aired. You still listen intently but she repeats herself – she always says the same things in your sleep. You know that she used to say much more, but you don't know what. You remember she could do something with her mouth, that she made a little clicking noise between her tongue and her teeth, a signal you could come closer, that it was time for something gentle, but you no longer hear it. It does not come from beside the bed anymore.

Because there was my father too, of course. He knew the art of being present even when he was not. He left mementoes. He showered us with gifts that made us forget our loss. He could, because he had the money. He showed us that we could also be happy without a mother.

Shortly after my mother's death, a ship arrived in the port filled to the rafters with animals from a far continent, intended for the menageries of the nobility. Everyone from around here went to see it and talked about it. They called the boat the 'ark,' after another ship which – after years at sea – arrived decades ago in the port with a hold full of hungry cattle gone wild. They inspected the mostly dead or half-dead animals and had great fun – they laughed at the bulky elephant, the ruminating horse with the two lumps on its back, the caged cat which was ten times the size of the largest cat around and at the enormous lizard with a mouth full of saw teeth which opened and snapped shut like a suitcase. My father, too, stood on the quay when the boat arrived thinking of his three little orphans at home. His duty to keep us safe from soldiers and passers-by weighed as heavy on his shoulders as the bags of oats on the shoulders of the porters on the quay. Something told him he should be home more often now that we were on our own - unless he could find us suitable company. And so, rather than taking a new wife, he bought each of us an animal.

He summoned us. For Richenel he retrieved a gold-coloured fish in a carefully wax-sealed glass bowl from his left saddle bag. Its veil-shaped tail was so long and wide, it sometimes completely disappeared behind it. It stared at us, opened and closed its mouth, then swam haughtily away. Next my father beckoned Idelies, the middle one, the talkative one, and gave her a cage with a brightly coloured bird that screeched, 'Go home quick, Walrik!' Walrik was the name of my father's soot-black horse. The bird's high-pitched cry made the faithful steed turn nervously about its axis, not knowing what more was expected of it.

Because there was still no suitable name for me, he called me 'little glass girl,' as usual. I took a step forward and he gave me a jute sack with a small animal struggling inside. I loosened the string it was tied with, and shook out a four-legged, barely-alive, creature. It looked like a pig but was black and had a head covered in lumps. I was disappointed. Whenever I thought of exotic animals, I thought of the winged horses, fish with women's faces, striped dogs, small dragons, vomiting birds of prey and talking snakes I knew from my sisters' stories. This animal was banal. I understood, however, why I got the pig. I was the youngest, and was not strong enough to find food for my pet. This beast would feed itself. It would live, even if I were long dead.

But my father was mistaken. Because of the roughness of the ride on the horse and malnutrition, the animal was so exhausted it looked as if it would not make the evening. He did everything he could, therefore, to save the young animal. He milked the cow and poured the still warm milk through a funnel into the animal's mouth, he made splints for its legs and rubbed its flanks with straw to stimulate its circulation. Squatting on my haunches, I observed how the animal endured it all, the same way I'd endured my parent's care when I was a newborn. I recognised myself in the wart hog. It was just as motherless and stiff of limb as I had been, and it didn't like the hand-mirror I held up to it either. It snorted at its reflection. It tried to stand up, but was unable to, thanks to its damaged legs and broken back.

Because my father's attention was all for the pig, my sisters' jealousy grew. They couldn't understand all the fuss. On the ship after all, half the animals had died, animals much costlier than this one, including a unicorn and some sea horses. They had reached the age when young girls become jealous, and everything suggested that my father favoured me – my animal was livelier and more fun, it was independent, even edible. Whispering, they watched how my father persevered in his attempts to save my pig. He put it by the fire and covered it with a sheep skin, only to say with a sob in his voice at the end of the day that it was hopeless, that the animal would be dead by the morning.

To everyone's surprise, however, it recovered – unlike Idelies' parrot, which lost its plumes and refused to talk all winter, and Richenel's fish, which was found floating belly up on the surface two days later. I liked the fact that my pet pig stayed alive, not so much because I was attached to it, but because I saw it as a victory over my sisters. I only really began to love him the day he gnawed through the splints on his legs, stood up and immediately produced a rosary of hard, black balls that fell on the head of the grumpy old elf on the tile in the middle of the kitchen. The old elf coughed and brushed at his clothes while all the other elves roared with laughter.

Because my wart hog stayed alive, my father's hope for me grew too. Expecting me, against all odds, to return his love one day, he began to visibly attach himself to me. He had clothes made for me - a little too large, holding the promise of growth - and gave me fewer presents because he'd started to believe he would have the time to give me as much as my sisters. Like everyone else, I thought of the wart hog as having saved my life – it turned out to be a fast runner and, because I always chased it, my blood began to run faster too. I learned to talk and swear from arguing with Orlinde, our neighbour who lived at the end of the path and struck my hog with a stick because it had dug up her newly sown peas. I began to grow because I ate the fruit it collected. Every day my skin became less transparent. I began to look more and more like my sisters. I walked around dressed in a sallow cotton shirt which I wore under my clothes in winter and reached down to my knees. I walked barefoot, my hair sleek around my face, my skin darker than it ever had been during previous summers. My fingers were red, as if dipped in blood. I no longer differed from the other children who wandered though the woods looking for berries which, when we were too many, we fought over.

Many years later I discovered that the elves who'd caught me at my birth had taken it upon them to ensure my wellbeing. When the milk cow contracted smallpox one day, their vague promises enticed me to go to the stables, where they had me touch the lumps on her udder and teats. I had no idea what they wanted of me but when the deadly smallpox epidemic decimated the population in our area years later and I did not become ill, I understood they had taken me under their wing. It was they who were my real benefactors and it was they who, with their aromas of refined herbs emanating from under the wooden floor, brought about the new, snow-white colour of my skin.

'She is vain,' my sisters said to my father, 'but she hides it from you. When you're away, she spends hours in front of Mother's mirror.' I did not react to the accusation. I loved my two sisters, each was precious to me in their own special way – Idelies because she made me laugh, Richenel because she made me think.

'That's because she knows she's growing more and more beautiful,' my father replied. He put a sheet over the mirror, just like he did after my mother's death, and forbade me to remove it. I realised that I was allowed to become beautiful, but not more beautiful than Richenel and Idelies. My time was no longer as precious as it used to be. I could now become a very ordinary girl.

In order to seal his hope, he gave me a name. He called me Rosalena. I whispered the word several times to get used to it, and asked Lucretia, the only woman around who knew the alphabet, to write it in the sand.

That same day I named my pig. I called him Zoran, and when I tried the sound of it in the woods, the wart hog came charging at me, knocked me down and stood right on top of me. I was about five years old and, as I lay with my head in the autumn leaves and Zoran snuffling around me without hurting me, I remembered a dream my mother had had a few nights before I was born. I'd always had quite a bit of room in her large round belly and was used to kicking and punching as soon as I woke, but those were my last days in her. There was so little space that I was cramped on all sides, my arms and legs folded as far as possible, my tailbone almost against her heart. Because it was so tight and I could feel her anxiety and excitement in my whole body, I remembered every detail of her dream. She was attacked by a beast which, like humans, walked on its hind legs and had front legs like arms, human-like like the hairy African apes my father described after the ark's arrival in the port. She fell to the ground and the beast lay on top of her. She froze in fear, certain it would touch the child she was carrying, but there was something which calmed her. The beast licked her and snorted, yet the sounds it produced could not conceal the sobbing deep in its throat. It poured its endless grief into her. The moment it detached itself from my mother, she had forgiven it. It walked away on four legs like an animal, its head hanging down, its tail drooping.

My father was a man who always stood. Even when he sat to eat or do sums, it was as if he were standing. He did not use a chair or sofa unless absolutely necessary - not at home, not elsewhere. He viewed the world from an upright position, indicating he wasn't tired and had everything under control. After my mother died, he remained standing before, during and after, her burial. He was a man always ready to leave, who didn't strike roots. Every place he went, he distanced himself from.

He spent more time in the city than he did when my mother was still alive. He would set out irritable and grumpy but return cheerful and refreshed. He never took us with him so Antwerp became a mythical, almost unearthly, place to us, releasing its secrets only in small doses. It took effort to imagine any city but thanks to the confusing, vague stories I heard at the table, I had a crystal-clear picture of Antwerp, one I sometimes tested against what I saw in the mirror in which I

followed my father's comings and goings. It was not so much a place of buildings but of stories. More a place for adults than for children, it was an eternally revolving merry-go-round of peddlers, butchers, barbers, merchants, mercenaries, wandering scholars, market vendors, singers and showmen – a place to stay but not to shelter, with more mud and shit in its streets than cobbles.

The citizens of Antwerp did not like people from the surrounding villages. They firmly believed that they were at the centre of the universe and claimed that we, 'them from the other side', lived like savages, incorporating children or dogs in our walls to placate the gods of the forest. Sometimes my father brought a business friend from the city, who told us about the city saints who made apple trees bloom in mid-winter, who struck sinners deaf and transformed tree trunks into pork and veal sausages night after night. He found it hard to believe that we did not know which relics arrived in the Church of Our Lady and why the pilgrims crawled under the reliquary before saying their prayers.

After my mother's death, angels came to our house too. I had never seen or noticed them before, but the priest in the brown habit who collected my dead mother and buried her in consecrated land pointed them out to me. Lucretia, who was there when the bearded man told me about the place my mother had gone to, confirmed every word he spoke. When I said that we had elves in our house but no angels, his mouth fell open and he quickly made the sign of the cross over my head and out-stretched hands. Lucretia turned to face me, made a hissing sound and when I still did not stop, she slapped my head, which she located with the last bit of eyesight she had.

There were small and very large elves, depending on their importance and standing. Most of them had huge white wings, like swans, but some of them had wings more like those of a chicken. They often held a lily, and frequently had doves flapping about them. Just as some people in our house, like my sisters, didn't notice their greyish-white appearance and continually moving wings, the angels didn't notice the tile elves. They walked through the elves and vice versa, without any of them being aware of the other, which sometimes led to comical situations because sometimes an angel sat down on a sleeping elf. The elf turned over in his sleep, and the angel shifted until he was comfortable again. When I addressed any of them, both the angels and elves responded, usually simultaneously, so that I could hardly tell who said what.

The elves loved Zoran. The angels loved me but couldn't stand Zoran, probably because he rubbed his warty face against their white robes and they could never get them quite white again. Yet I did my best to stay on good terms with the elves because they lived with us permanently, while the angels only visited for a short while, accidentally, to disappear without saying when they would be back. It was thanks to the elves that I became healthy and beautiful. They brought me strange, brightly coloured fruit with soft, filmy skins and sour-sweet flesh that fell apart in crescents. They gave me a special awful-tasting oil to drink which they claimed was good for me, and fibrous turnips they chewed for me with their own little teeth. I didn't touch the bland porridge Lucretia stirred until it was cool enough for me to eat in the morning because I wasn't hungry anymore. She hardly noticed that I didn't eat and passed everything on to my sisters. Her eyesight had deteriorated so much that she couldn't tell the difference between a full and an empty bowl anymore. And even when their stomachs were full, my sisters were still happy to empty my bowl, hoping I would die faster without food.

They could not help but see – instead of becoming transparent, my skin gradually turned snow-white. My eyes became large and dark, my lips were said to be red as roses. But they never paid me compliments. They kept saying I was ugly, even years later, when the young men from our area took roundabout ways to catch a glimpse of me. Because my eyes lit up the first time my father

compared my lips to roses, he promised he would plant me a rosebush against the bare wall of the shed behind the house. The following summer the first flowers bloomed and, inexplicably, Zoran was mesmerised by both the colour and fragrance of the roses that his blunt snout could reach. Our fear that he might eat the sweet smelling blooms was apparently misplaced. He inhaled their perfume and made the happy snorting sounds I knew from the times I had rubbed him dry with balls of hay and fed him from my hand. He lived in a deserted badgers' burrow until then, but as soon as the roses were in bloom, he made his nest in the shed. To this day I believe that it gave him almost human pleasure to see his house in bloom.

My love for the rosebush was boundless. I pruned it, fertilised it, and in summer showed its flowers to every passer-by. I took Lucretia by the hand and let her touch the petals. 'You loved flowers before you were born,' she said when we were in the shed and I noticed she didn't want to go back inside yet. 'Your mother always told me she sensed it while she was carrying you. Thinking of poppy fields alone made you move inside her womb.' She looked sad. First I thought it was because of the memory of my mother, but then she put her hands on my face and said, 'Your mother wanted you to be as beautiful as a rose, but it wasn't to be. I hoped you would change over the years, but from what your sisters say about you, I understand you've remained misshapen.' I took her hand and pressed it against my mouth. Then I led her back to the house, very slowly, so that she wouldn't fall.

Orlinde, our strange, spiteful neighbour, came to look at the flowers regularly. She looked at me as she always did, with eyes closed and mouth shut. Whenever she spoke to me about colour and shape, she kept trying to peep through the window to catch a glimpse of my father. I answered her questions out of politeness, and made an effort not to let on that I knew she hit Zoran with a stick whenever he came anywhere near her. I also distrusted her because I knew she made soap from pig fat perfumed with rose petals. I never left her alone with the rosebush, not even when my father came and stood beside us, grinning from ear to ear and asking if she would like some cider.

The elves and angels came to look at my rosebush too. They approached it silently, the angels stirring up the dust on the ground with their mighty wings, the elves buzzing like insects on their fragile, gossamer winglets. Young men passing by on horseback reined in their mounts when they saw the shed. They slid from their horses and came inside to ask permission to pluck a rose. They wore pointed shoes, tunics both long and short, stiff leather girdles and - in rainy weather - capes with hoods. Some were dressed according to the latest fashions, others had clearly never heard of a tailor and looked as if they had themselves patched together the mishmash of colourless pieces of fabric they wore. When one of the more fashionable men addressed them, Richenel and Idelies quickly patted their curls into place, and bade him welcome to carry away as many as he could. Because my sisters were beautiful, they expected their lives to be filled with excitement. The young men put their arms around their shoulders, slapped their bottoms and told them stories. But when I came out to cut a rose with the gilded scissors my father had given me, they froze. They stared speechless at me. I would then hand them the rose, and they would receive it with numb hand and dazed expression before trotting away without a word of thanks to either me or my bewildered sisters.

Idelies would burst into laughter after such a scene. 'He's seen a ghost!' she would scream.

Richenel did not find it amusing at all. She had reached marriageable age and was tired of seeing handsome men grow flustered and disconcerted when I appeared. As she grew older, more buxom and more attractive, the days ahead of her seemed to multiply. She was waiting for a miracle, I was not. Looking back on it now, I can see I was living the life of an old woman, without expectation or

regret, utterly convinced that a change of appearance could never be interesting . And when I entered the kitchen, Idelies' hoarse old parrot would scream from its cage: 'Boo, a ghost, boo, a ghost!'

Sometimes such a man would return, especially in the autumn when loneliness began to gnaw. One of them even feigned severe illness. He stumbled into the kitchen and asked if he could rest a while in our house. I was in the attic so I peered down through a crack in the floorboards to see where the exhausted-sounding, panting male voice came from. I recognised him at once. Months earlier, he had introduced himself to my sisters as Tiras, the flute-carver, and had asked them for a rose. When I had come outside, he had turned away from my sisters and, nonplussed like the others before him, taken the rose from my hand without saying a word. Richenel, who was peeling apples, immediately leapt to his aid and took him to my father's enormous bed. She sent Idelies to fetch Lucretia, telling her to make sure Lucretia brought every possible herb for internal diseases. 'Tell her it's the stomach!' she shouted after her, and from the excitement in her voice I could tell Tiras attracted her. Idelies had barely left when Richenel was up in the attic begging me not to show myself.

'You frighten people!' she said in a sugared tone. 'This man is on his deathbed. Please don't make it any worse than it is.' I lowered my eyes and promised not to approach the sickbed under any circumstances.

'Is there anyone else in the house?' I heard Tiras ask after she returned to him.

'No, no,' Richenel said quickly. 'It was just my parrot.'

'Didn't you have a younger sister, even younger than the girl who has gone to fetch the herb woman?'

'Yes, yes, but she's away travelling.' I heard the flute-carver groan and turn over. I sneaked into my mother's room and sat down in front of the mirror. The girl I saw was nearly fully grown and had a narrow, white face. Her nose was straight and her eyes large. There was scarcely a trace of my earlier translucence. I could hardly believe I might frighten someone.

I stayed in the attic and in my mother's small room for days on end, following my father's journey. Idelies brought me food, two carding combs and a bag of wool for me to occupy myself with. I missed Zoran and the rosebush - which would probably have lost all its leaves, I thought. With a cloth over my nose and mouth to stop me choking on the fluff I raised, I spent hours listening to the melancholy flute music rising through the floorboards from the sickroom. It was eerie because it sounded as if there were two flute-players. Sometimes I thought my father had come home and was playing the second flute but I could see in my mirror he was still travelling.

Richenel seldom left her invalid alone but when she did (to draw water or collect firewood), I heard the flute-carver jump out of bed and search the house. Several times I heard him climb the ladder to the attic, but each time he had to rush back to his sickbed because he heard my sister approach. One day she stayed away longer than usual. I was sitting on my bed, quiet as a mouse, working on a lace collar for my father, when he suddenly pushed open the hatch. His mouth fell open in surprise and I was just as stunned as he was.

'The girl with the rose,' he said, more to himself than to me, 'I knew it.' He fell to his knees and told me that I was the one he had come for. 'I have never seen a woman like you,' he said, his voice

quivering. ‘Your face has a radiance I have only ever seen in the stained-glass of cathedrals.’ The bobbins between my fingers became entangled. I looked down, and then up, and then down again. Never before had I thought of myself as a woman, and never before had I considered myself attractive. The young man’s expression was so imploring, his lips trembled so violently and his eyes were so misty that I took pity on him and allowed him to touch my hands. The elves on the floor hid their heads deep between their shoulders so they would not have to witness the scene. And because of this inattention, they did not hear Richenel approach. Tiras the flute-carver was chased out of the house for not being sick at all and for going to my room. With the scissors she found in my sewing box, Idelies cut the branches off my rosebush and threw them at Zoran, who immediately began to squeal. But the mutilated bush did not deter the flute-carver. He kept returning until Richenel and Idelies ordered a huntsman they knew to set wolf traps around the house. I was left alone with my reflection, which looked at me like a complete stranger for days. Sometimes I stole out of the house to the shed, lit the stove there, undressed and lay down in the hay. Zoran knew my distress. He stood over me as he had done when I was five, his rough masseur’s tongue on the skin of my throat and thighs. Meanwhile I did everything I could to ignore the elves around me, who never seemed to tire of joining hands, dancing in a circle and singing, ‘He’ll be back, he’ll be back, whether you like it or not, he’ll be back soon.’