Peasant Psalm

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An extract

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I'm just a poor peasant and though I've had my share of trouble, the peasant's life is the most wonderful life on earth. I wouldn't swap places with a king.

God, I thank You for making me a peasant!

I was born over there in that cottage. There were fifteen of us open mouths, and although we sometimes got more slaps than food, it was still a childhood and we grew into men strong as tree trunks.

A big household is a joy.

I like a big bunch of kids. A good tree must give lots of fruit. Growing things is our trade. Children as well as cabbages. Then you know what you're living for and who you're working for. It didn't kill our Father and our Mother. At the age of eighty she was still straight as a ramrod and, whistling all the while, would hoist a sack of potatoes into the loft all by herself. Father had worked until he was as crooked as a question mark. When they put him in his coffin he either sat up straight or his legs stuck in the air. They had to crack him in two, or at least I did. The others were scared. The old Honourable Lady from the chateau, from who we rented our land, often came and asked him to work for her as a gardener. Light work, good pay, and share in the profit from the fruit.

'Nonsense!' he would say. 'A peasant must stay a peasant, otherwise the world won't go round.'

That's why he fussed and sulked, because only one out of all of us was keen to follow the peasant's trade.

I have brothers and sisters in Antwerp and Brussels, there are two in America, one in France, one in the loony bin, that can happen in the best families, and one is a monk with the barefoot fathers in Dendermonde. We only see him when they need money in his monastery. That's why our Dad said to me: Our root, I stayed. I couldn't leave the fields. It's such a draw. The fields attract you. You love them and you don't know why.

For looked at closely, the priest is right when he says that the fields are a kind of enemy, a giant, he says, that fights against us day in, day out.

One has to oppose it body and soul. Have you ever considered what has to be done to put bread on your table?

Ploughing, fertilising, harrowing, sowing, threshing, grinding and baking. And if Our Dear Lord doesn't intervene, and if you don't bribe the saints with a candle, against the slugs, the worms, thunder and lightning, then all your sweat will have gone down the wrong hole. But if you have the sandwich from the new harvest which you tore out of the ground with your own strength, in your square hands, and you can sink your teeth in it and at the same time you see a whole table of eaters around you, it's as if the Boss upstairs puts his hand on your shoulders and whispers softly in your ear: very well done, Wortel, thank you!

No, to my way of thinking the fields are not a giant, but a giantess, a huge female creature that you can't see to the end of. Her face is the sky. She lures you on. You walk over her body, you crawl over her body. Of course, she frustrates you like all women. That's the good thing about it. You coax and cajole her. You don't give up, and then she becomes mild and obliging, and gives and gives, there's no stopping her.

A peasant must also have a good wife in his bed, but she mustn't stay lying in it. She must make butter, feed men and beasts, help out, work the hands off her body till there's nothing left but elbows. I've known lots of girls, I was quite a lad in my time, I fought for them, more from love of fighting than because of the girls. I waited for the right one and the right ones are rare, and also come along unexpectedly.

Our Fien came from over the River Nethe.

Strange how love conquers one's heart.

On the pilgrimage to Scherpenheuvel, I walk to Scherpenheuvel every year, we are sitting in the same café, with lots of other people, eating our sandwiches. Outside it was raining, and the floor was muddy. She was sitting opposite me but I hadn't yet noticed her. There were so many people and my mind was elsewhere, I wanted to shift along a bit to let a farmer's wife through and unexpectedly knocked over my glass of beer. She jumped up to protect her dress, and her sandwiches fell on the floor. I was embarrassed and gave her three of mine. She didn't want to take them. 'Then I'll throw mine in the mud too,' I said. They had bacon in them.

Then she took them.

'Do you like them?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said,' it's really good bread.'

'Where do you live?'

We got talking. She shone like a dry onion. She was a full-figured, buxom woman. I would have liked to go back with her, but she was with her family.

I couldn't get her out of my thoughts, I saw her in front of me the whole time: in the fields when I ate, and I dreamt such lustful dreams about her.

I couldn't find rest or peace of mind, and whenever I could I went to the Nethe in the evenings. From there you could see the tiled roof of her house. I lay smoking one pipe after another and kept whistling the song of 'Ave Maria' to make her think of Scherpenheuvel and me, and come and see what was up. No such luck.

But the next Sunday I see her coming from mass along the other bank with her sister.

'Well,' I shouted brazenly, 'did you like the sandwiches?'

She began giggling and laughing. I got very embarrassed, but still shouted, 'Can I bring you a whole loaf shortly? We baked only yesterday!'

They ran down the bank, along the verge. She looked round once.

'I'll be back tomorrow,' I said, encouraged by this.

I waved my hand. She waved back. I felt it was going well, and my heart was so restless that I couldn't sit in the same café for five minutes.

The next day then, towards evening I took all my courage in both hands and my bread in a towel, and without saying a word I was gone. It is an hour round the town. I open the door. There sit her brothers, five of them, and her father, a man like a pillar. They were eating potatoes from the pan. I didn't say much. Just that I had brought a loaf for that one over there. I didn't know her name yet. She sat there looking ashamed and she was close to tears. I don't know how, but before I could count to three I was outside lying thrashing about with my legs in a canal. They had kept my loaf. I heard them laughing. One against six was no good, I was like a sack of broken pipe stems. I just crawled home,

but as you can understand raging like a tiger, and with the fixed resolve to have my revenge and the girl.

At home I spoke to my three brothers about it, quietly.

The next day the four of us stood sharpening our knives on the whetstone. By the time it was pitch dark, we were over there. Her brothers, who were home at the time, called for pen and ink, without us having to use our knives. She was so alarmed she dropped the washing up. And while my brothers beat her brothers, I said to her, I said to her: 'The ground will be red with blood unless you become my love!'

Her sister had run out and called for help, but before that help arrived, with dogs and pitchforks, we jumped into the Nethe, and stood jeering at them jauntily from the other side.

I was going mad. I felt I had made a mess of everything. I was not fit for work anymore. I spent every day spying on her house from behind the irises. If she loves me, she'll come and take a look sometime, because our cottage was easy to find from there.

One Saturday, when I was about to give up on her, I was lying there again, and I saw her coming down the path to draw water. When she had filled the first bucket, I called out: 'Hey there!' She went pale. She didn't dare shout, but motioned with her hand for me to go away.

'I'm coming!' I cried, 'wait!

I took off my cap and swam across. She was rooted to the spot with fright. She started to cry because she was so pleased to see me. We sat down together for a bit. And you know how it goes, you're both young and on fire, and they work against you, which makes things worse, and you don't talk about sandwiches any more. I'm in seventh heaven and have already swum back. That evening I sang so much the neighbours thought I was mad. We met several more times in the evenings. It was haymaking time. The haycocks are lush and smell so good. And what I had suspected came to pass. A month or so later her father came to see us. He had to speak to me. I kept my cleaver at the ready, and he asked me what I intended: marrying or not, and the sooner the better!

'Yes,' I said, 'but with a horse and a cow thrown in.'

He took the bait. It was a lovely wedding. And our late Dad danced with delight.

'You pulled a fast one on him there, Wortel' he said.

That first night! They had hung bells beneath our bed, and our Fien had probably had a drop too much to drink and complained of a severe headache. I wasn't fooled. I thought, I've got time enough. I went for a walk in the moonlight. The corn was ready to be harvested, and is there anything nicer than corn to sleep in? I lay down somewhere there and looked up at the stars. I often like looking at them. You see something completely different. Your heart grows still and you think of things you don't have time for otherwise. Of Our Dear Lord, who created all that and of the insignificance of your own life. The priest says the stars are as big as planets. Paper is patient, but as soon as I lay there, I felt something great and solemn come over me. Like in church sometimes and then I promised myself always to do my duty as well as I could to God and everyone.

The next day when the sun came up and stood picking corn with our Fien where I had slept the very same night.

Then the misery began. At about seven o'clock Fien went to fetch coffee and sandwiches, we had only just sat down, when at the first bite she started screaming: 'I can't go on, my head weighs like lead.' She had to go home. I was left alone. Struggling against the burning sun and a big swathe of corn.

That has been a wretched experience, that pain in the head! And if you doesn't feel anything like it, you think it's play-acting, saint-I-think. Then harsh words are sometimes exchanged. That headache has cost us lots of money and shoe leather. The doctor, the piss doctor, Aloiske the

magician and what a succession of pilgrimages! I have scarcely ever seen her without a white cloth and something round her head.

Other people laughed at it.

Once we went to Peuthy. She came back cured and in two weeks had not a second of pain.
