

asleep. We're in separate bedrooms, on separate mattresses. There's been a mistake. We're not meant to be one. No one wants to be a Siamese twin, to have their organs stuck to someone else's. He smiles while he dreams. I don't make him smile. I swear at him. I punch him, on the shoulder, in the face. He's had it up to here with me and vice versa. We're too much for each other but we carry on. I give him the finger, fuck you, as soon as I get up. Morning, what do you want for breakfast? My outstretched finger in his face. I'd love to break his teeth. The restless child is singing softly between his mum and dad. Who do you love more? asks his Dad, about to explode any second. Is it so difficult for him to say how was your day yesterday? Apparently it is. How was your day yesterday? I ask myself, and answer, fine thanks. I proceed to tell myself about my day, chatting away. I leave the table and he eats my croissant and finishes my coffee. He lets me go, obviously, but then he regrets it and bursts out, You're evil, leading me into the pastures where the vegetation is taller than us. He doesn't give in. He makes me walk blindly, the grasses hitting me in the face like thistles, like the bones of a skeleton. Then he decides to take advantage of the situation and presses himself up against me, but it doesn't go anywhere, and he pushes me further in. I start to speak, I don't know what words come out of my mouth but I keep them coming and he tells me, When you speak it's like the car alarm, it goes on and on, it's unbearable. So I carry on speaking, and now I'm shouting, though I don't know when I raised my voice. Can't you speak without shouting? Can't you give the verbal diarrhoea a rest? He doesn't understand that I can't. Control yourself, he says, I don't understand a thing when you speak non-stop. Why don't you take a pronunciation course? Why don't you do a language exchange with a local? We stop somewhere. Now what? But when I go to say something he snaps at me and walks a few feet away to where I can't see him. I press my fists into my eye sockets. It hurts. What's the point of crying? I'm a startled deer, a sad, sensitive deer. A cool breeze picks up. He doesn't come back to me, but he hasn't left either. I'm just another patch of grass. Nothing happens until suddenly we hear grunts and mooing. I run around in circles and end up on the streaked tarmac. He's there too, watching the show. The cows have been separated from their calves, when just a second ago they were all grazing together quietly, stuffing their faces. These bovine mothers are causing a massive scene, mooing so loudly they grow hoarse, doing everything they can to resist. But their babies get taken away just the same. See you later, calves, I say, waving goodbye. Bon voyage. The cows are still there by the side of the road, stunned. The vultures arrive in time for lunch with their collars of feathers, holding their cutlery and napkins. We go home together, arms around each other. We love each other so much. We sing a catchy little ditty, *why oh why, tell me why could it be, that when a cow's tied up, her calf won't leave. Someone else's misfortune is a swift kick from a horse.*

Christine Brooke-Rose

A fly straddles another fly on the faded denim stretched over the knee. Sooner or later, the knee will have to make a move, but now it is immobilised by the two flies, the lower of which is so still that it seems dead. The fly on top is on the contrary quite agitated, jerking tremulously, then convulsively, putting out its left foreleg to whip, or maybe to stroke some sort of reaction out of the fly beneath, which, however, remains so still that it seems dead. A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy in its innumerable eyes, but only to the human mind behind the microscope, and besides, the fetching and rigging up of a microscope, if one were available, would interrupt the flies. Sooner or later some such interruption will be inevitable; there will be an itch to scratch or a nervous movement to make or even a bladder to go and empty. But now there is only immobility. The fly on top is now perfectly still also. Sooner or later some interruption will be necessary, a bowl of gruel to be eaten, for instance, or a conversation to undergo. Sooner or later a bowl of gruel will be brought, unless perhaps it has already been brought, and the time has come to go and get rid of it, in which case—

— Would you rather have your gruel now or when I come back from Mrs. Mgulu?

That question is inevitable, but will not necessarily occur in that precise form.

— Two flies are making love on my knee.

— Flies don't make love. They have sexual intercourse.

— On the contrary.

— You mean they make love but don't have sexual intercourse?

— I mean it's human beings who have sexual intercourse but don't make love.

— Very witty. But you are talking to yourself. This dialogue will not necessarily occur.

The straddled fly stretches out its forelegs and rubs them together, but the fly in top is perfectly still. Soon the itch will have to be scratched.

— Hello, is there anyone there? It's Mrs. Tom.

— Who is it? Oh, hello, Mrs. Tom, did you get my message?

— Yes, that's why I came, and how are you?

— I was delayed this morning by Mrs. Ned's tub, it was broken you see, so I was too late to catch Mrs. Jim. But Mr. Marburg the butler kindly offered to get in touch with you.

The itch is scratched very gently, so as not to disturb the flies. The fly on top trembles, quivers and sags, then stretches out its left foreleg to flicker some reaction out of the straddled fly, which, however, is now quite still. Sooner or later the knee's immobility will undergo a mutation, a muscle will twitch and the flies will be disturbed. But for the moment they are dead to the world, even to the commotion made at the door by the coming interruption, the question which sooner or later must occur, in some form or another.

— That was Mrs. Tom.

— I know, I heard her.

— She got my message in spite of everything. You see I was late at Mrs. Mgu-lu's this morning, on account of Mrs. Ned's tub.

— Look, two flies are making love on my knee.

The squint seems bluer today, and wider. The pale eye that doesn't move is fixed on the two flies, but the mobile eye wriggles away from them, its blue mobility calling out the blueness of the temple veins and a hint of blue in the white skin around. Then this eye too remains fixed, reproachful perhaps.

— Mrs. Mgu-lu looks quite ill you know, at least, as far as one can tell, with that wonderfully black skin. Yesterday apparently the doctor changed all her medicines, so she said I could have her old ones. This one is for the thyroid. And this one's for the duodenum, look.

— Don't come too near, you'll frighten them.

The pale eye stands guard over the flies. The other moves along the print.

— *Duodenica* is an oral antacid buffer specially prepared for easy absorption by the sick the aged and the very young its gentle action provides continuous antacid action without alkalinisation or fluctuation reducing gastric acidity to an equatable level of pH4 which is sufficient to relieve pain and discomfort with practically no interference with the secretory balance of the stomach or other normal digestive mechanism. *Duodenica* is particularly recommended in cases of over-alcoholisation supersatiation ulceration hyper-acidity dyspepsia *Duodenica* is NOT a drug one capsule twice a day during or after meals NOT to be taken without a doctor's prescription.

In the sudden silence the fly on top is very still, so still that it seems dead under that pale policing eye.

— Would you rather have your gruel now or in a little while? It makes no difference to me, I have things to do.

— Sooner or later I shall have to disturb them.

The mobile eye shifts towards the knee and back, but the two flies lie quite still, as if dead to that extra light of awareness briefly upon them.

— Where's your fly-swatter? Ah, here.

— Don't! ... frighten them.

— There's hundreds of eggs in that fly. Think of the summer. It's the winter flies you have to kill. Well I'll leave the thyroid thing with you, and the *Duodenica*. There are some suppositories too, let's see, anti-infectious therapeutic and tonifying by means of bacteriostatic properties of four sulphonamides selected among the most active and least toxic, together with—ah no, that's for dogs, how silly of me.

The winter flies lie quite still, dead to the removal of that pale light of awareness briefly upon them. Sooner or later there will be a movement to make, a bladder to go and empty and a bowl of gruel to go and eat. The fly-swatter is made of bright red plastic. Through it, the high small window looks trellised in red, a darker red against the light, almost a wine red. Through the trellis the winter sky is blue and pale, paler than the summer sky. But it is difficult to re-visualise the exact degree of blueness in the summer sky without interposing picture postcards as sold in the city streets. No sky is as blue as that, not even here in the South. It is difficult to re-imagine the exact degree of heat, and picture postcards are cold. The winter flies lie quite still, dead to their present framing in a circle of dark red plastic, dead to the removal of the red plastic frame around the light of awareness on them. Sooner or later they must be interrupted, but now there is only immobility.

The knee lowers itself gently, an earth transferred, a mountain moved by faith. The leg stretches slowly to a horizontal position. The elbows on which the recumbent body rests have to straighten out so that the body can rise from the mattress on the floor, using the hands to lean on. In the process the knees bend up again slightly. The winter flies take off, locked in a lurching flight, at eye-level, then, together still, they sway up towards the high small window a long way from

the floor, and land their conjugal bodies on the transverse bar, where they lie very quiet, so quiet they might be dead.

Even at eye-level the flies lies quiet on the transverse bar, so quiet they might be dead.

The kitchen door is framed by the bedroom door. At the end of the short dark passage, almost cubic in its brevity, the kitchen through the open door seems luminous, apparently framed in red. The doors however are of rough dark wood. The walls of the passage are at right angles when curving is desired.

The circle of steaming gruel in the bowl is greyish white and pimply.

A conversation occurs.

A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy among the innumerable white globules in the circle of gruel, but only to the human mind behind the microscope. And besides, the fetching and rigging up of a microscope, if one were available, would interrupt the globules. If, indeed, the gruel hadn't been eaten by then, in which case a gastroscope would be more to the point. And a gastroscope at that juncture of the gruel's journey would provoke nausea.

IN THE HEART OF THE GUINEA PIG DARKNESS

(2015)

Aase Berg

Translated by Johannes Göransson

The gorge is swarming with guinea pigs. They crawl on each other like spiders: here in the gorge, here in the stack, here in the heart of the guinea-pig darkness. The gorge is swarming with guinea pigs, and we run, you and I, with your soft wax skin and our love. We run in the tunnels and the rumbling water chases us in a wave of guinea pigs rolling against each other. Jupiter hangs heavy and cruel up there in the firmament, and nervespies lurk behind every evil corner. Guinea pigs are swarming. They are born, they hatch, out of caves and holes. The guinea pigs are swarming and crawling around on the gigantic guinea-pig queen's sensitive, swollen egg-white body. She gives birth and groans, she moans and bleeds. Everywhere the membranes, everywhere their bloated puffbellies. We run with the heart in the tunnel, you and I, while nervous systems break down behind us, while the amniotic fluid surges in the pumping, pulsing chasm. Rotting acids and guinea-pig lymph are streaming yes streaming down the walls. Guinea pigs are thronging. Here they come and get us! Now they're opening us up, now they're swallowing us with their pink flesh organs. Now I love you and now I fear you, and now I finally roll out your guinea-pig body on the baking sheet. And you lean back and let your skin grow into the stinking cell plasma of the guinea-pig wall, my beautiful traitor, and the guinea pigs swarm all the way into the depth of your treacherous guinea-pig organism.