A. Koolhaas

Tender Skin

Translated by David Colmer

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The windows of a first love's house all have the quality of her being able to unexpectedly appear at them, making them as restless as skin that is too thin, ready to blanch or blush at the slightest emotion, or turn blotchy at the first sign of tension. When she's not standing at the window of her own room, they are impassive yet ominous.

Where, in God's name, where in the house can she be? In terrible circumstances perhaps, because she's not at her usual place at her invariably open window that endless summer? How can a window be so open, as if there isn't actually a sheet of glass set in a wooden frame at all? And yet it frames her, too, as she stands there every day when the boy rides past on his bicycle – always at the same hour and in the same way.

Why is it always summer? They have never exchanged a word; they've hardly even acknowledged each other. They don't go to the same school. But still she's standing there when *he* leaves *his*, as if she never has anything to do and can always be there at her post to let his eyes catch hers as he, enveloped in a cold fog of fear that she might not be there when he passes today, raises his completely blank face towards hers, full of dread and, despite all his memories of everything that's happened to him since his birth, aware of nothing but how breathtakingly large this window is. There are no limits to its size, just as there are no limits to this summer, even though it's framed by blossom and branches and ivy and everything that is inexhaustible and fixed in place. And how golden she is: forever the only one who can ever answer the question, and the tension behind it, as to whether there exists between life and death another creature that is nothing but pure love. Today is all of life.

The reality might be that she, objectively speaking, has hair that is short and bobbed, but sleek and flaxen, and that, in that same window, a clothesline has been

hung with a splash of colour draped over it to dry. Just as a flame often begins slightly above the wick or burner, so it is with love: it exists in the empty gap between the flame and the mortal reality of the wick. Nothing can be seen and yet just above it is the flame, sometimes roaring.

The boy is called Jokke. A name like that is a punishment in a classroom. After some grandfather or other, of course, who might have still dug peat in a swamp. The girl is called Takkie de Koning. Presumably, at least, because Jokke once turned back after passing the window to read the nameplate on the door, which said *A.G.J.M. de Koning MD*. He'd heard from another boy at school that she was called Takkie (assuming they meant the same one).

Just across from the doctor's house is the school where Jokke's father is a teacher and, together with another teacher who lives in the same street as them, Jokke's father walks home from that school every morning for lunch and again in the afternoon. That other teacher always knows everything about everyone in town and when Jokke asked his father if he knew Dr de Koning, his father had stared at him for a while and then kept looking back at him and finally asked what made him bring that up. 'Well, no reason. A boy at school said it was opposite your school.' The very next day the other teacher informed Jokke's father: 'Nothing very edifying. He's apparently done time; something with little boys, or girls, or abortion, or maybe just shirt-lifting.' Something filthy in any case, a dark, dirty, despicable business. 'That boy from your school shouldn't go near the place, that doctor's,' Jokke's father said at dinnertime. 'Tell him that.'

'Why not?'

'Nothing very edifying.'

Case closed, but the next day Jokke nodded at Takkie at her window for the first time and gave her a smile (very thin and wry) and she glowed overwhelmingly in reply. She was always alone at her window, which lost its dimensions more and more until it contained the whole summer. Nobody else ever appeared at any of the other windows, no more than in the room with her, assuming it was even possible for someone to reach her there. Her father and mother must have been in the darkness of other rooms; the mother endlessly weeping, then starting over again and wringing her hands. But in her immense generosity, Takkie, innocent and cruelly condemned to the misery surrounding her, had smiled at him.

Her hair wasn't long enough to twist into a rope ladder; that escape route to a better world was impossible. And in any case, a reality where Takkie suddenly fell into his arms was the last thing Jokke wanted. He could already hear himself saying, 'This is Takkie de Koning, Dad. You know, from the doctor's opposite your school. Can she stay here??' His father would consider her so tainted, coming

from that house, that within a quarter of an hour she'd be back at her parents' with the window closed, never to be opened again. Jokke did think about finding a place for her at a friend's, and if she wasn't allowed to join them for meals, he would take her all kinds of things. Every day and in the evening – going out onto the street with some excuse or other – and something else as well; something surprising.

Although it's very possible, maybe even likely that there is no truth to the other teacher's story, it has made Takkie's house – beyond the room with her window – dark and gloomy, imbued with a morosely whispering, somewhat mouldy, never-ending guiltiness. The thin, checked protective covers on the thick carpet strips in the halls and on the stairs never get creased as guiltiness walks calmly and is never uproarious or hasty. Haste is completely absent in fact, as there is never any need to prevent anything; guilt has already been established and is known to all. Things like the allure of depravity and the appeal of the forbidden did not yet exist for Jokke. At most, a heartrending background to Takkie's life added a noble ardour to his flame. But there were few signs of a rent heart. In the days after his first, hesitant, thin smile, she was invariably beaming as he began his approach. He, too, began smiling in the distance and as he passed she even made a small gesture, possibly to say that he had such a good bike, or that he rode it so well, or simply as a general statement that someone worth greeting was cycling by. He passed the window as a hurried mob of separate molecules, each waving a flimsy paper flag, and only afterwards regained a composition and borders and even thoughts, and needed to consider how he might once in his life be able to stand in front of her and say something. Or listen to what she said before replying. That was, for the time being, the border post of his life. Beyond it lay unknown territory. Not heavy with the expectation of possibly terrifying events or shining with joyous incidents and festive situations, but simply unknown, unmapped, blank, white or whichever colour you chose. Black, too, was possible. Because that, of course, is a very essential feature of the unknownness of territories like that: with every thought you think about them, they take on a different colour.

Jokke lay in bed at night sometimes thinking about how idiotic it was that he seemed:

a. unable to think of any way of getting Takkie down from that window and onto the street.

b. even less able to imagine what to do then, once he had. A great wilderness lay before him, but all the steps he could take into it, or rather, all the steps *they* could take into it together floated in mid-air and didn't touch the ground.

One day her window was open as usual, but she herself was nowhere to be seen. Everything collapsed as it should and all the previous smiles and greetings were revealed as illusory. His heart stood still, his life was ruined, his face tightened as for a disaster.

But fifty or sixty feet further along, she was standing on the street. With a bicycle of her own.

He braked and stopped. She was on the side with the houses and he was in the middle of the street, and they both said, 'Hello.'

‘Somewhere on a river lies the small town of P.’ This is a reasonable way of starting a story. One can go on to provide some details about the river, then the small town of P., proceeding quickly to the inhabitant of the small town of P. who enjoys one’s particular interest. This story is also about a river and the small town of P. but for now those things don’t matter and, what’s more, it is not at all about an inhabitant of that town, but about a stretch of land between the river and the town.

This stretch of land is a wilderness. It may belong to the enormous house on the outskirts of P. that is now only used during the summer and Christmas holidays. It is a ridiculously large house with all kinds of towers and turrets that have precious little to do with any kind of architectural design, a truth that is plain to see for all. The house belongs to a long-established family of contractors whose name is known at home and abroad – the name borne by Takkie’s mother – dredgers mainly, who once carried out enormous projects, digging and maintaining international canals, dredging harbours and winning contracts like one from the Tsar of all Russia to install street lighting in St Petersburg. And after every particularly profitable commission (something that generally only became evident upon completion), when a few million had been earned on top of the flamboyantly budgeted tender, another tower or typical extension was added to the house. In this way the eccentric house with its foundations in the rich clay, far from any city, had come to include things like a theatre with a revolving stage built by the company’s own carpenters. And when the family’s numerous cousins were there and had brought friends to stay, plays were performed in costumes drawn from the large theatre chests and baskets that filled the backstage area like giant magic boxes that turned pimply youths into princes.

As the family also loved litigating, a legal battle was fought over decades for the land between the river and the big house. The family argued that this land belonged to the house; the town council insisted come what may that this particular tract had never been included in any of the expansive properties already in the family’s possession. The town council of P. was right and the inhabitants of the house knew that too, but legal proceedings are a pleasant way of filling one’s days and the family always got so agitated when their case was in danger of collapsing that they continually upgraded to even more cunning and even more expensive lawyers, who finally succeeded in generating so much confusion that the small town of P. had to relinquish its hopes of expanding to the riverbank and becoming a municipality of some consequence, with the illusion of attracting and accommodating its own brickyard.

As a result nobody ever did anything to the land in question, nobody visited it and the weirdest and ghastliest things could happen there without any chance of their ever becoming known.

And that is it exactly: living between the river and the house are two houdnas. A male and a female. They are possibly more or less the last of their species, which has been virtually exterminated.

The houdna is somewhat reminiscent of a beaver, if only because it lives on and in water, builds embankments and has similarly thick fur, albeit it much softer and of a rusty brown colour that turns almost red in summer. It also seems as if the hue changes slightly when the animal is in danger. This trait is rarely seen in the houdnas near P. as there are no animals that pose a threat in the vicinity and the houdnas know nothing of humans, who don't enter their territory on the river.

These houdnas have developed a kind of hibernation. Or at least they sleep a lot in winter and conserve their energy, even if they do maintain some level of consciousness. In any case, a specimen has never been spotted in winter. Specimen is actually a word that doesn't really fit a houdna. Not only because no one here has ever seen one, but also because they have an unusual dignity of movement, combined with what can only be called 'mindfulness'. As a result every houdna is above all *the* houdna and not a specimen, one of many. And both the male Lussel and the female Twenna clearly display that quality of being mindful of all they do.

Besides having a peculiar dignity of movement, the houdna is also remarkably graceful. And also, on occasion, remarkably fast. A great contrast is formed by the tail, which is distinctly ugly. A flat, fleshy, hairless thing, somewhat triangular, as if the houdna is lugging a rubber trowel around to do any masonry that might come up. And the strangest thing is that the tail is attached very broadly at its base and ends at something of a point and this point seems to have an extra tail of its own, with a tuft, as seen on the lion or the dormouse. As incongruous as a flag on a mud barge to use the Dutch saying, which can hardly be more literally applied as this tail is what the houdna uses to flatten the muddy banks it builds in its territory, and as the root of the tail is so wide and the whole so muscular, it can even make corkscrew tunnels and watercourses, in accordance with its insights or moods.

The houdna always lives on tidal rivers and usually in an estuary. This is because it eats fish and its greatest skill is its ability to rapidly build embankments. It clears a section of the bank so that it's bare, flattens it out and then builds an embankment around it with an opening towards the river. At high tide this flattened enclosure floods and, as soon as the water is at its highest, the houdna closes off the opening to the river. When the level starts to fall again a basin forms,

which – given the length of the embankment on the river side – can often contain a large number of fish that have swum into it during high tide. Once the tide is low again, the houdna uses the muscular tail it can twist into all possible shapes to corkscrew breaches into the embankment so that the water can drain away.

At this stage, both Lussel and Twenna keep watch at the holes they've made and flick fish that try to escape up out of the water. Once the water is gone and the muddy floor of the basin is more or less exposed, the houdnas harvest and eat the captured fish. Then they demolish the whole embankment in preparation for the next high tide; ready to build it up once more when the water in the river is again approaching its highest level. In the meantime they sleep or work on the extension and maintenance of their territory. This is larger than one might think. Close to the big house, the family of contractors had once built a landing place at the end of a small canal they dug from the house to the river, very deep; out of love of dredging, perhaps. Lussel and Twenna never make basins along that canal, but they have cleared a few spots so they can lie there in the sun. The sun doesn't shine often, which is why they always rush to those open places when it does, even abandoning their fishing, another sign of the great deliberativeness that generally marks their actions. They make choices. If they feel peckish they go to catch fish, but if they have a clear preference for sunbathing they leave the fish to swim in peace. Lussel can become very thoughtful when he starts to get hungry while lying in the sun. What could be more natural, he thinks on these occasions, than setting to work? But it is so wonderful in the sun. But what makes it so wonderful that nothing surpasses it, even in his present condition? Sometimes, when the sun is unusually fierce, he thinks that it should be possible for him to remember what it was like when he was still a very small houdna and the things that happened then. Because it is only when the sun is very hot that everything in his body and mind seems perfectly attuned. Building embankments and then drilling holes in those embankments is not something he would have come up with himself – he can't deny that, no more than dealing with ebb and flood and knowing when they are due. Somehow there must have been other houdnas who demonstrated the techniques so that he and Twenna could master them. Sometimes he tries very hard to remember that time and, especially, those other houdnas. It's like an old tunnel in an area he and Twenna almost never use anymore. As there are no other houdnas around, they must have made it once themselves, but why do they never go into that old tunnel anymore? Clearly there are such things as a 'now' and a 'then' and there must also be reasons why they avoid entering that aimless tunnel. Sometimes he sits at the entrance to ponder why he never goes into it anymore. Is it simply because they dig tunnels in their territory and are now working on a

different area? Or is there some special reason? After a while Twenna comes to join him and he can tell that she feels the same, that she has that same wonderment. Sometimes she will then suddenly rush into one of those tunnels they no longer use and Lussel will run after her. And then all at once they remember certain narrowings, bumps in the floor or old tree roots. But only if they pass them. Never beforehand. And they also never know where the tunnel comes out. If one of those tunnels has collapsed a little or become narrower so that they can no longer run through it quickly, they stop. But with a very different feeling than the one they have when making a completely new tunnel. Then they don't care where they come out. It's all the same. But here a real secret lies beyond the obstacle, something they *once knew* that will lead them back to *then!*