Primordial Soup

By Bregje Hofstede

Sample translated by Kristen Gehrman

For more information, please contact Marisca van der Mark at Marianne Schönbach Literary Agency

m.vandermark@schonbach.nl

The midwife has taken off her shoes. What long toes she's got, her tendons bulge every time she's about to lift her foot, they tense up to the ankle. It's a wonder her toes don't curl up out of her foot with every step she takes.

She lays her hand on my belly, I can barely feel her fingers and yet she says: here's the back, there's the feet. The light ripples across the folds in her face, shadows seep into her eyes. She's silent as she touches me, it seems such a little thing but it's everything, her silence probes the space between us, filters, measures.

Not only is she barefoot, her breasts move freely under her shirt. Dark crescents in the slanting light, dark crescents in the blue of the fabric. As if she doesn't feel how they react to the temperature, how they occasionally perk up and relax. As if she hopes to put me at ease, show me that it's okay that I, too, am only wearing a T-shirt, a long black thing over my bulging belly, that it's okay I'm not wearing any underwear and okay that she occasionally sticks her hand up my cunt and okay that I'm lowing. It would be weird to keep your underwear on, and not particularly inviting, is it? Keeping a curtain across the entrance to the world.

Warre holds the cherry pit pillow against my lower back. When I move, or when he moves, I hear the crackling of the pits. He's sitting on the carpet with his legs crossed, leaning back against the sofa with the pillow in one hand. Always so nonchalant.

The first time we spoke, he was sitting there eating fries. He laughed loudly and talked with his mouth full, bla bla bluster, and he kept running his hands through the hair on the back of his head to wipe the mayo off. He saw that I saw, and he just kept doing it.

Give me a guy like that, I thought. The type of guy who pulls his butt cheeks apart while walking next to you, to let the gas pass. And never apologizes for it. Maybe he could teach me that.

It hasn't helped much, that much is clear, it still takes hours of agony for me to relax a sphincter, and even now I still say *thank you* and *excuse me*.

Do I want something to drink, the midwife asks. Yes, thank you.

Bare feet, despite the tile floor. As if she's trying to reassure me, like interviewers do: they feed you a small but sincere crumb of themselves, and then, once you've taken the bait and shared a personal detail, they draw out all kinds of things you weren't planning on sharing.

In Japan, they did the bare feet too. Whenever you entered a tea shop or a restaurant, you had to take off your shoes at the door and walk around in your white socks, which betrayed the shape of your foot because the black leather of your shoes had rubbed off on the pressure points, and with every step you left behind a visible footprint, a film of moisture that should have been kept hidden away, suddenly exposed. Vulnerable and tamed, you made your way to your little table. And ow ow ow owwww ow ow

That trick won't work now, there'll be no taming this time.

Why is he walking away? Why wasn't he with me, as if he didn't know I needed him then.

No one looked at me. No one sought my gaze or spoke to me. The people in the Tokyo metro, even though they were practically pressed into each other, could have each been filmed separately and

pasted side by side, there was so little happening between them. You can tell in films where the actors' bodies don't subtly mirror each other, when they don't approach or recoil, when they don't all move with the vibrations of that delicate web that holds them together and that you don't notice until it's suddenly not there. Like in *The Parent Trap*, when that red-haired actress was still a child and not on drugs, and she had to play both twins by herself, and the only scenes that are really convincing are the ones where she had a body double in front of her, some other girl with straight red hair whose face you never see but in whose body the lines could land. You can't be a body without another b ah ah aah ah ah.

Yeah

And I had packed Warre's T-shirt, something I could hold on to, at least until I found myself standing in front of the baggage carousel that kept going round and round while the stewardess with the powdered-away face repeated an alien name, and when, out of boredom, I finally looked at the sign she was holding, I saw that it was, in fact, my name. Your bag may not arrive, she said.

May not or will not?

She giggled: Will not. Then say so, tell it like it is. There I was at eleven o'clock in the evening at the airport without a bag. And then the metro and the strange street numbering and locating the mailbox with the key, and opening the door to the Airbnb to something very naked, to a rumpled bed with a pizza box next to it stained with dark circles of grease and curdled strands of cheese hanging over the edge of the cardboard, and on the floor a pair of pants like shed skin, collapsed as if the legs that had held them up had dissolved, poof, gone was the body, and although I felt like someone was still there, or had been there just a moment ago, you can always feel a thing like that. In the bathroom maybe, the door was slightly ajar and the light was on, I didn't dare to look. So there I was at midnight in Tokyo with no bag and no place to sleep and without his T-shirt, which was still in the bag, an unwashed T-shirt with aaah ah aha ah aaaah

Yes, I'm fine.

No, I'm not fine, not fine, every time I feel her moving down, I also feel her sliding back up again, once the squeeze of the giant fist lets up.

Very good, very good. No not good, tell it like it is. Your baby may not arrive. Your baby hasn't even dropped.

The problem when you can't touch anyone is that you're no longer in touch with yourself, that you shut down and congeal. You would expect them to speak English at an airport help desk, but no, not a word, so after a few tries, I pressed my phone into the hands of the hotel doorman so he could ask about my bag. He had to press in some numbers, a booking code, and he took off his white gloves to do it, and when he was done he put them back on and took a tissue and carefully wiped his fingertips off the screen before he returned the phone with two hands, wearing those white gloves. I didn't even get his fingerprint.

No, don't let go! I need to feel hands. Skin.

You shut down and congeal because the circuit is interrupted and the flow no longer flows, has nowhere to go and stagnates. The first time I was allowed to touch his skin: his neck and his chest and the long trough of his spine, full of birthmarks: red spots, small dark ones, big flat chestnut ones, big ones lying on top of the skin that you can flick back and forth with a fingertip, that seem

attached by a thread, that look as if they're drops that have fallen from such a great height that they are jumping back up out of his skin while others are just sinking in, but the moment you spend looking lasts so long that you don't see them splashing, the moment stretches and curves and goes round and round so that you never reach the end of it, my fingers went further and further and touched him so lightly that it seemed like I was floating above his skin and not feeling the grain of it, just the warmth rising. Would you kindly do this forever, thanks, he said the first time, and at first I laughed and then I cried because maybe there is no end to a skin that always circles back on itself but there is an end to touching it.

The first time someone touched me in Japan was on the boat to that foggy island, I was standing on the bow watching and so was that man, the pleat of his coat grazed mine and a shiver ran down my spine, as if my clothes had become my feelers and from then on I would have to depend on them to feel my way through the world.

This is making me seasick, all the sloshing and rolling, the high waves, oh here comes uh uuuuuh uh.

As if

As if

As if the ocean is pulling on my intestines, dragging them along in the spring tide.

The Atlantic Ocean, not the Pacific.

Stand up they say, stand up and walk

walk on that sliver of skin.

Let gravity do the work, stay on your feet so she'll finally drop. Around the couch, around the threadbare couch, past the black maw of the fireplace. With your eyes closed, the room feels gigantic, absolutely oceanic or even cosmically huge, with my eyes closed I can't even feel the walls anymore. You can always feel the walls of a room, even with your eyes closed, even behind your back. But now I don't feel any walls. When I look, yes, it's there, the meter-thick mass of stone around me, but with eyes closed:

a much larger space

I feel it with my back. It's as if extremely delicate threads are reaching out of it,

gossamer sprites swirling, swarming around, that sway through the air and pass straight through things, so light and agile that they reach through atomic cracks, fluttering along with the vibration of a magnetic or electric field, following the tremor that shoots through it at nanometer size and lightning speed, threads that float along on an incomprehensible current like stands of extremely fine weeds and that aren't the least bit bothered by pain

Jesus God Almighty

Pain

The things I called by that name

Splinters

Bruises

A broken finger

When the only thing that came close to it was that wide heavy damp rot with which the blood announces itself,

that feeling around your waist, on your sides and back that you're disintegrating and breaking from your own branch like a fruit turned to dark jelly

an overripe fruit, yes, globby and sticky, oozing out of its skin, a plum too long forgotten in the front pocket of your bag so that the juice seeps out through the seams. But this, then, this feeling of lightness and space that folds out of my back, this doesn't care about it and isn't bothered by the fact that I'm constantly being crushed to a pulp by my own body

no, it flows and ripples,

unimpeded, jubilant, jubilant.

Maybe I'll never come back. Maybe I'll stay here in my body that has swallowed everything else, the living room, the house, the village, the thunderstorm, the sky, and I'll never come back.

How long

how much longer?

A glance at the clock: half past one.

And the midwife is taking a god damn nap, she's sitting on my couch with her head back and her mouth open, a black hole and black fillings.

If you don't use your eyes for a while they say that the neurons that help you see are diverted toward something else, hearing and feeling, for example. An hour is enough. That's why you dream, they say, to give the brain cells something to see so you don't lose them. But you can also do it on purpose, you can also teach your neurons to pick up on things other than sight, like a magnetic field, or height, or things we don't yet know exist. How long have my eyes been closed and have I already started to learn to sense something else, or will all sense be squeezed out of me with every a aaaa aaaaaaaah

It burns like a hot pool would burn. And there's no ladder to climb out, no, the only way out is to pull the plug, down there, and escape through that little hole, the only way out is through my own cunt.

There he is again with that little yellow bucket, holding it under my nose. Do they think I'm going to puke this baby out?

If you swallow an apple seed, an apple tree will grow in your belly, ha-ha, and if you let a human seed pass through your lips and if you swallow it with your greedy mouth, a human will grow, and nine months later you'll spit that out too. It's true.

It's tru oo ooo oooo oooo

Fuck

Where is that pillow, cherry pits

Cherry pits, yeah, a little higher

Yeah there, hold it there,

with your big hands,

I dreamt about those hands when I was on that boat and on that island, big big hands with blond hair and raised veins, intimate like the shape of a body under the sheets, his tanned hand against the white sheet right next to my face, the wrist that I want to sink my teeth into, just for a moment, when he thrusts too deep, to give him back the pain

But this pain

Fucking hell

To whom can I

give it

I have to sway, let the pain flow through my body the way you move a too-hot bite through your mouth.

Swaying moaning dancing.

I can hear them. There in the distance. They're looking for something, they're looking for the string that they'll use to tie off the umbilical cord. A piece of cooking string, the kind you use for a roast, I boiled it until it was sterile and then slipped it into an envelope with a pair of tweezers. I know where it is, but what an idea, do they actually think the baby is coming, bloody idiots.

On the mantel, I say, and I walk over to the trapdoor, the tiny trapdoor, to see what they're doing out there.

Look at that, can you believe it, everything is still there, and so close by, and so ordinary, and happening one single moment at a time, wow, like nothing is going on here.

If you just stay close to me, I won't have to lick any more trees, not even trees the color of cinnamon. The rest of the forest on that Japanese island was green and mossy, meters-wide trunks living at their majestic leisure, so broad and tall and wet with mist that they had smaller forests growing in the grooves of their bark, and everywhere the rustle of falling raindrops. Drops dripped from the bearded branches, dripped green from the moss, and suddenly in the middle of it all was a tree the color of cinnamon, with skin as smooth as mine. When I reached out my hand it felt warm, as if it belonged with me. As if I was touching something of my kind. I hadn't touched a human for three weeks, and it surged through my body, suddenly it flowed again, and my skin crackled ever so softly like when the electric blanket comes alive, instantly I was aglow, my buds swelled. I pressed my mouth against the bark, yes my tongue, licked off the water running down in a tiny rivulet, and if I had known how, I would have opened that tree and myself too, a cut in the bark perhaps, and stuck

myself in like a branch being grafted, and then I would have waited until the living stream of sap flowed inside me too. Yes,

Yes yes yes yes yes

Swallowing a seed and waiting to see what will grow.

There were trees thousands of years old on that island, some had been cut down so that you could climb up and stand on the spot where thousands of years ago a seed had fallen on the dark earth, and you could count the circles, the expanding ripples that the seed's fall had created, year after year. Until the saw came. And at the edges of that colossal stump new leaves had sprouted, new shoots so that I didn't know whether I was looking at a tree that was dead or alive, at something young or old. Perhaps everything is as old as the world. Maybe this child is as old as the trunk from which it springs, how else could something so small hurt so much, unleash such power, this cuckoo pushing me out of my own nest.

Ai ai ai ai

Drink

okay

whatever.

From a straw, as if I'm an invalid. Tea through a straw, a straw that swishes around in the glass so I have to hunt for it with an open mouth

As if lowing weren't enough.

Oh oooh oooooh

Where's that pillow!

Don't leave

I wanted him to see that I could do it all on my own. That I was going to be happy traveling by myself. That he should just have it out with that girl he apparently missed so much. Who was so cheerful

Uncomplicated

Sexy

Sexy sexy

Where's that bucket

There he is

There he is with his nice big hands and his wet eyes

smells like peanut butter

Bucket!

There he is, after all he is here with me, so beautiful, beautiful man lovely hands great cock great love of mine

mine

I wanted his seed after he told me that, about her, about having gone back to her, no we didn't use a condom, and for the first time in my life I felt: mine mine mine.

Not the person

you can't have people

but you can have their usufruct,

I could have his seed, and gobble it up with both sets of lips. My body had to drink it all up, that chalice rising from its crumpled pouch of skin. A groundcherry, the other day we were eating at a restaurant and there was a groundcherry on my tartlet that I set aside and at the very end of the meal unfolded from its crisp little lantern, wrinkly grayish brown, veined and crumpled, and then suddenly the shiny orange fruit came bulging out. When I bit into it, the smell gushed out, the smell of when he cums too far down the back of my throat to taste it anymore. Granted, the taste of the groundcherry itself is lighter and sourer, but the aftertaste is exactly the aftertaste of semen. That's what I wanted: all of it.

Where is he? He walked away, I can feel it. He's gone. But here are the midwife's feet, her hand through my hair, fingertips that know the way, so nice the way she's humming, just please let her keep humming. Oh there he is again. Oh, o-o-o

When she presses that thing against my belly suddenly a swift heartbeat fills the room, buh-bum buh-bum, buh-bum, the baby is already galloping around invisibly, buh-bum buh-bum, buh-bum, the ultrasound wand turns me inside out.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Breathe.

Breathe in, breathe out. Yeah sure. Breathe a new world out through your cunt.

His breath comes from very far away, he smells of bread and sturdiness.

You're really spacing out aren't you? You look like you've taken a lot of drugs.

Spacing. Yeah. Making space. Opening up.

They put the dog upstairs, he whines from very far away, but he can hear me, he's answering.

Yes, Kep, this is worth whining about, and more. He feels me disappearing.

You're really spacing out. You're really far away, aren't you?

I have to look for his voice with a magnifying glass, he's there all the way at the edge, a flea in the distance. He's smiling but he's a flea. I have no use for fleas right now, I need giants.

Help me, help

giants please

Not lukewarm tea through a straw that swings so far from my mouth. I'm light years away, do I have to do those last centimeters myself?

Ten centimeters.

Ten centimeters!

They have no idea how far that is, that's falling from sight, that's so far

Now if he were to sing or hum, just hum, meet me humming from his brittle husk of reality.

His living room his matchbox

Ooo oo oo

She's whipping me, the baby, like a piñata

Until I burst open and pour out my sweetness

Sweet sweet

Sweet sweet ripping

I tumbled backward through my back and here is a space

so big

The living room is a hazelnut

No, the shell of a hazelnut

A tiny shell very far away, there at the furthest edge

All the way there, all the way on the outside

I hear him talking

That's how thin the world has become

The skin of the balloon

The peel of the fruit

That shiny,

That shrill shell of sound

Here:

Dark

Silent

Halls and halls of pain

Folded

vaulted

pliable

endlessly stretchable pain.

Ba-boom roars the thunder, roars the night. Ba-boom.

It's not working, I say.

Yes it is says the midwife, feel for yourself, there's the head. She guides my hand between my legs, and I feel something that has my warmth and is made of my body but doesn't bring my touch back to me. It is soft like a rotten peach.

Around again, endlessly around that couch. Stay on your feet.

Can you take it, he asked. Fuck, you can take a lot. Fucked me until I bled. And this? Can you take this too, my uterus asks, this payback for all the years of pounding.

No. No, no, no

No

Are they still there?

Yes

There they are, all of them, the bare feet the bucket the humming and him, in the small room.

As if time just keeps ticking away.

This can't be done.

This can't be done.

I can’t hold an ocean. This can’t be done can’t be done can’t be done